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SAMUEL SCOVILLE, Jr.

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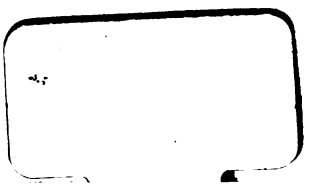

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WILD FOLK

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THE PINCUSHION OF THE WOODS

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WILD FOLK

By
SAMUEL SCOVILLE, JR.
AUTHOR OF "EVERYDAY ADVENTURES"

With Illustrations by
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AND
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THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS
BOSTON

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To my Son
Gurdon Trumbull Scoville
who has learned to know
and love so many of our Lesser Brethren
of Earth and Air and Water
this book is dedicated

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WILD FOLK

I

THE CLEANLYS

ALL winter long the Barrens had slept still and white. Rows and regiments of low pitch-pine trees, whose blue-green needles grow in threes instead of the fives of the white or the twos of the Virginia pines, marched for miles and miles across the drifted snow. Through their tops forever sounded the far-away roar of the surf of the upper air, like the rushing of mighty wings, while overhead hung a sky whose cold blue seemed flecked with frost. The air tingled with the spicery of myriads of pine trees. Grim black buzzards, on fringed, motionless wings, wheeled and veered over this land of silence.

Then, with the suddenness of the South, spring came. The woods became a shimmering pool of changing greens. The down-folded leaves of the little lambskill stood erect again, like rabbits' ears, over claret-colored flowers, and the soft warm air was sweet with the heavy perfume of cream-white magnolia blossoms. On jade-green pools gleamed the buds of yellow pond-lilies, like lumps of floating gold, and the paler golden-club, whose blossoms look like the tongues of calla lilies. Everywhere, as if

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set in snow, gleamed the green-and-gold of the Barrens' heather above the white sand, which had been the bed of some sea, forgotten a million years ago. In the distance, at the edges of the Barrens, were glimpses of far-away meadows, all hazy with blue toad-flax and rimmed with the pale gold of narrow-leaved sundrops with their deep orange centres.

Through the woods wound a deep creek, whose water was stained brown and steeped sweet with a million cedar roots. Unlike the singing streams of the North, this brook ran stilly, cutting its deep way through gold-and-white sand, and meeting never rock nor stone to make it murmur. On its bank in the deepest part of the woods grew a vast sweet-gum tree, covered with star-shaped leaves. Tangles of barbed greenbrier set with fierce curved thorns, and stretches of sphagnum bogs guarded the tree from the land side. In the enormous hollow trunk, some fifty feet above the ground, a black hole showed.

There, one May afternoon, as the sun was westering far down the sky, a small face appeared suddenly, framed in the dark opening. It was a funny little face, surmounted by broad, pricked-up, pointed ears, and masked by a black band, which stretched from above a pair of twinkling golden eyes clear down to a small pointed muzzle. As the owner of the face came out of the hollow and began to creep slowly and cautiously down the side of the great tree, his fur showed in the sunlight a dull brownish-gray, with black-tipped hairs on the back, while those on the round little belly had white ends. Last of all

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appeared the black-ringed, cylindrical tail which is the hall-mark of the aracoun, raccoon, or coon, as red, white, and black men have variously named the owner of said tail.

This particular little coon was the youngest of four fuzzy, cuddly, blind babies, which had appeared in the old den-tree early in March. His father was a wary, battle-scarred giant among his kind, who weighed thirty pounds, measured three feet from the tip of his pointed nose to the end of his ringed tail, and was afraid of nothing that crawled, ran, swam, or flew.

As the little coon walked carefully, head-first, down the tree, he showed his kinship to the bears by setting the naked black soles of his little hind feet flat, instead of walking on his toes as most of the flesh-eaters do. His forepaws were like tiny black hands, with a very short little finger and the thumb the same length as the other three long, supple fingers.

It was the first time that this particular youngster had ever ventured out of the home-nest. A great bump in the middle of the trunk was his undoing. He crept over the edge, but in reaching down for a safe grip beyond, lost his hold and, with a wail of terror, fell headlong. Fortunately for him, the gum was surrounded on three sides by shallow pools of standing water. Into one of these the young climber fell with a splash, and a second later was swimming for dear life back to his family tree.

At the very first sound of that little SOS the head

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of Mother Coon appeared in the opening, with three other small heads peering out from behind her. Seeing the little coon struggling in the water, she hurried down the tree, followed in procession by the rest of the family, who had evidently resolved not to miss anything. By the time she came to the bump, however, the small adventurer had reached the trunk from which he had fallen. Fixing his sharp claws into the bark, he climbed up the tree, bedraggled, wet, and much shocked at the manifold dangers of life.

Seeing him safe, Mrs. Coon at once turned back. The three little coons turned with her, and the reversed procession started up to the hole. The littlest of the family climbed slowly and painfully as far as the bump, whimpering all the time. There his feelings overcame him. He was positive that never had any little coon suffered so before. He was wet and shaken and miserable and — his mother had deserted him.

" Err, err, err," he began to cry, softly, but exceeding sorrowfully.

It was too much even for Mother Coon's stern ideals of child-training. Once again she crept down the tree and, stopping on the bump, fixed her claws firmly into the bark. Stretching far over the edge, she reached down and gripped the little coon firmly but gently by the loose skin of his neck and, turning around, swung him safely up in front of her between her forepaws. Then, urging him on with little pokes from her pointed nose, she convoyed him up the tree toward the den, from which three little heads looked

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THE FIRST JOURNEY

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down. At times the memory of his grief would be too bitter to be borne, and he would stop and whimper and make little soft, sobbing noises. Then Mother Coon would pat him comfortingly with her slim, graceful paws and urge him on until at last he was safely home again. So ended well, after all, the first journey into the world of any of this little family.

By this time the sun was set, and the old coon climbed down the tree to the nearest pool, for a bit of supper. As she approached, there were squeaks and splashes, and several cricket frogs dived into the water ahead of her. Wading in, she looked around at the woods and the tree-tops in the darkening light, in a vacant way, as if frogs were the very last thing she had in mind; but under the water her slim fingers were exploring every inch of the oozy bottom with such lightning-like speed, that in less than a minute three frogs had been caught, killed by a skillful nip, and thrown up on the dry bank. Convinced that there were no more left in the pool, she approached her supper-table; but before she would eat came the ceremony and ritual of her tribe and blood.

No raccoon, in winter or summer, by night or by day, at home or in captivity, will willingly eat any unwashed food except green corn. One by one the dead frogs were plunged under the water from which they had just been taken, and were washed and re-washed and rubbed and scrubbed, until they were clean enough to suit Mrs. Coon. Then, and not until then, were they daintily eaten. Thereafter soft

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little chirring calls from the tree-top said that her babies were ready for their supper, too; and she climbed back to the nest, where they snuggled against her and nuzzled and cuddled and drank of the warm milk which would not flow much longer for them, since mother raccoons wean their children early.

While they were still at supper, there sounded from the black depths of the pine forest a long whickering "Whoo-oo-oo-oo," much like the wailing call of the screech-owl. It was Father Coon on his way home from where he had been spending the night in one of his outlying hunting-lodges, of which he had several within a radius of a few miles; and a little later he joined the family. He brought Mother Coon a little tidbit in the shape of a fresh-water mussel, which, although the shell was still dripping, she climbed down and washed before she cracked and ate it like a nut.

After supper, the two started off on a hunting-trip, while the babies curled up in a round ball, to sleep until they came back. The gray hour just before dawn found the hunters crouched in the long marshy grass at the very tip of a point of land that ran into a little pond, which was ringed around with the stunted pines of the Barrens. Just as the first light showed in the sky, a flock of mallards, headed by a magnificent drake with a bright green head, swung in to feed. Never a sign nor sound betrayed the presence of the ambushers until the drake reached the edge of the shore. The startled bird had not even time for one quack before there was a splash,

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and old Father Coon had twisted that gay and gallant neck and was back on the shore again, with the quivering body thrown over his shoulder.

Part of the duck was washed and eaten then and there, and the rest was carried back to the den-tree, where the four little coons were taught to tear off little strips of the rich, dark meat, and to wash them repeatedly before eating. That first taste of flesh and blood forever barred them from the warm milky fountain which had been theirs before. From this time on, they had to hunt for themselves.

The very next night their education began. In the warm fragrant dusk, the whole family trotted in a long, leisurely procession through the underbrush, until they came to a broad bank of warm, white sand that overhung the deep waters of the stream which wound its silent way like a brown snake through the Barrens. Here, in a half-circle, the whole family crouched and dozed comfortably, with their pointed, striped noses on their forepaws, while the dusk deepened into the soft-scented, velvet blackness of a summer night. For long they stayed there, in the still patience which only the wild folk possess.

At last, over the tips of the pointed cedars the moon rose, and turned the white beach to silver. All at once, from where a sand spit sloped gradually into the water, sounded a tiny splash, and out into the moonlight crawled a monstrous, misshapen object. From under a vast black shell ridged with dull yellow a snaky neck stretched this way and that, surmounted by a fierce head, with a keen, edged beak and gleam-

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ing, cruel eyes which stared up and down the whole beach. It was a snapper, one of the largest of its kind, which weighed perhaps half-a-hundred pounds and would have filled a small washtub.

As the great turtle crawled slowly up the bank, the little coons crouched tensely, and turned their heads to see how the veteran hunters of the family proposed to attack this demon of the stream. As if asleep, both of them crouched motionless; for long ago they had learned that watchful waiting is the best policy when Mrs. Snapper comes out of the water of a spring night. Back and forth the monster crawled heavily, stopping to look and listen for minutes at a time. Satisfied at last that no danger threatened her on that lonely beach, she chose a little ridge of loose sand not ten feet from the raccoon family, and scrabbling with her hind legs and thrusting with her thick, strong tail in the warm sand, dug herself in. There she stayed all the night through, until she had laid a couple of hundred parchment-covered, cylindrical eggs, the greatest delicacy on the whole bill of fare of the hunting folk.

Just before dawn, she pulled herself heavily out of the hole she had dug, and the loose sand poured in after her, filling the cavity and covering the eggs that were hidden there. Not until the turtle had smoothed over the displaced sand and waddled back into the stream did the head of the raccoon family make a movement. He was no coward, but he knew too much to trust his slim paws or his pointed nose anywhere near Mrs. Snapper's shearing jaws.

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When the brown water at last closed over her monstrous body, Father Coon led his waiting family to the bank and deftly uncovered the newly laid eggs, on which they feasted until sunrise sent them back to bed.

As the freshness of spring melted into the hot, green sweetness of summer, the education of the little Cleanlys went on rapidly. They soon became experts in breakfast-botany, and learned to dig for the nutty tubers of the wild bean, with its brown purple blossoms, the spicy roots of the wild sarsaparilla, with its five ashlike leaves and fuzzy ball of white blossoms, the wild ginger, the spatterdock, and a score or so of other pleasant-tasting wild vegetables. They learned, too, how to hunt frogs, and to grub up mussels, and to catch those little fresh-water lobsters, the crawfish, without getting their fingers nipped.

The Cleanly children made few mistakes, and hardly ever disobeyed their parents. There was a reason. Disobedience among the wild folk means death, and he who makes one mistake often never gets a chance to make another. The sister of the littlest coon was a sad example of this fact. She decided to become a reformer. It seemed to her that it would be pleasanter to hunt by daylight than after dark, so she tried it — once. On her first (and last) trip she met old Sam Carpenter, a Piny, who always carried a shotgun with him.

Of course, accidents will happen in wild-folk families just as among us humans, only in a wild-folk

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family, an accident is more apt to be fatal. It was the oldest of the three little Cleanlys, after the reformer had gone, who suffered first. He had been hunting in the wildest part of the five-mile circle, which the family used, and it was after sunrise when he scrambled out of the shallow pool where he had been frogging.

Suddenly from a dry dense thicket near by, there was a fierce hiss like escaping steam, and from a tangle of fern darted the mottled brown-and-white length of a great pine snake. Its curious pointed head, with its golden, unwinking eyes, shot forward, and the next second a set of sharp teeth closed on the soft nose of the small coon. Unlike the poison people, the pine snake has no fangs, and its teeth are used only to hold its prey for the grip of its choking, crushing coils. This particular snake was nearly eight feet long, and as thick around as a big man's wrist. Luckily for the little coon, the thick bushes guarded him for an instant against the smothering coils.

Dragging back from the dreadful glare of the fixed, lidless eyes, he tried to tear loose, and squalled with all his might for his mother. Fortunately for him, she was not far away. Anyone who had ever watched Mrs. Coon climb carefully down a tree-trunk, or move deliberately through the thickets, would never have identified her with the furious figure which flashed through the bushes at the very first cry of the little coon. Before the great snake had time to draw its coils clear of the branches, or even to

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disengage its head to meet the attack, the raccoon was upon it, and sank her sharp teeth through the reptile's spine just back of its head. At once the shut jaws gaped, and the little coon sprang back from the heavy body, which writhed and twisted and beat the bushes horribly in its death agony.

Mother Coon was always practical, with an open mind in regard to matters of diet, and while her cub whimperingly licked, with a long, pink tongue, a much-abused little nose, she began to strip off the speckled skin of her late opponent, and to convert it into lengths of firm, white meat on which the whole raccoon family fed full that night.

It was the youngest of the family who was the next victim. Again it was Mother Coon whose love and wisdom and courage outweighed chance on the scales of life and death. He had been exploring the shallows of the stream near a deserted cranberry bog. All the raccoon people like to follow the shallows of a stream, on the chance of picking up frogs, mussels, crawfish, and other water-food. A solitary rock off a tiny island, in shallow water close to the bank, is always a favorite spot for a hunting coon. Old Sam Carpenter knew all about raccoon habits, and also about one of their weaknesses.

On this night the latest-born of the family came splashing down the warm shallows, and half waded and half swam out to a tiny sandbar some six feet from the bank. There he crouched and scanned the water in the moonlight, on the chance that he might catch a sluggish, red-finned sucker as it winnowed the

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water through its long wrinkled tube of a mouth. Suddenly, against the yellow sand, he saw three or four gleaming, silver disks, brighter even than the silver-scaled shiners which he had often tried vainly to catch. Old Sam had begged from a traveling tinker a few scraps of bright tin and strewn them near the little islet.

No raccoon can help investigating anything that glistens in the water, and this one felt that he must have his hands on that treasure-trove. Wading carefully out into the shallows, he dabbled in the sand with his slim forepaws, trying to draw some of the shining pieces in to shore. Suddenly there was a snap that sent the water flying, a horrible grinding pain, and the slender fingers of his right forepaw were caught between the wicked jaws of a hidden steel trap.

"Oo-oo-oo-oo!" he cried, with the sorrowful wail of a hurt baby coon.

But this time Mother Coon was far away, around two bends of the crooked stream, investigating a newly found mussel bed. The little coon tried in vain to pull away from the cruel jaws, but they held him unrelentingly. Then he attempted to gnaw his way loose, but only broke his keen little teeth on the stubborn iron.

At first, he was easily able to keep himself above the water; yet, as the minutes went by, the unremitting weight of the trap forced him under more and more often, to rest from the weary, sagging pain. Each time that he went down, it seemed

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easier and easier to stay there, and to slip into oblivion under the glimmering water and forget the torture that racked every nerve in his struggling little body. Yet, in spite of his funny face and quiet ways, the little coon came of a battling breed which never gives up. Once more he struggled up from the soothing coolness of the water, and for the last time his cry for help shuddered faintly across the Barrens. At last and at last, far away down the stream, he heard the snap of a broken branch, and a minute later the rapid pad-pad of flying feet along the sand, as he fought weakly to stay above the surface, sure that the coming of his mother meant rescue from all the treacheries that beset him.

In another minute she had reached the bank, and with a bound, her fur bristling, was beside her cub, ready to fight for him to the last drop of blood in her lithe, powerful body. Fortunately for her cub, the years had brought to Mother Coon wisdom as well as courage. Once certain as to what had happened, she decided instantly upon the stern and only answer which the wild folk have for the snares of their cruel human brethren. She waded out so that her back was under the exhausted little body of her cub, and, ducking under, gripped the trap with one of her flexible hands, strained the little paw away from it with the other and with a few quick slashes of her sharp teeth severed the three black, slim little fingers that the bitter jaws held fast.

As she cut off one after the other, she could feel the warm furry body that rested upon hers thrill

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and quiver with the pain; but never a sound nor a struggle came from the littlest of the coons. Another minute, and slowly and limpingly he was creeping back to the den-tree. Better, alas, for any child of the wild folk to go maimed and halt through life than to fall alive into the hands of us humans!

The weeks went by. Summer waxed, until the Barrens were green waves, starred and spangled with flowers, and echoing with bird-songs. All through the long, warm, flower-scented nights the raccoon family feasted and frolicked, and the little ones grew apace. One velvety warm night, when the crescent moon had sunk in the west, Father Coon led his family toward the farm lands, which year by year crept farther into the Barrens. Beyond the woods they came to a field of towering stalks, whose rustling leaves overshadowed plump ears of creamy corn, swathed in green husks and wound with soft silk. At the sight the leaders for once seemed to forget all their caution.

Into the field they rushed, like mad things, and, pulling down stalk after stalk, they stripped off the husks from an ear, and took a bite or so of the angel-food beneath, only to cast it aside and grasp another. The little coons followed their parents' example, and pulled and hauled and tore and chanked among the standing corn, until it looked as if a herd of hungry cows had been there. The feasting kept on until every coon, big and little, was brimming full of melting, creamy corn.

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As they ambled contentedly back toward the dense woods, there came a sound which made Father Coon hurry them forward. Scarcely had they reached the edge of the first thicket, when across the field dashed three mongrel hounds, which belonged to Sam Carpenter, and were out hunting to-night on their own account. There was no time to gain the shelter of the trees. Just ahead of them one edge of the stream touched the cleared country, while its farther bank was deep in the Barrens. Following their leader, the whole family took to the water. They had hardly reached the middle of the wide stream when, with a splash, the dogs plunged in, only a few yards behind. Immediately Father Coon dropped back, for when it comes to matters of life and death it is always Father Coon who fights first. To-night, in spite of numbers, the odds were all in his favor; for the raccoon is the second cousin of those great water-weasels, the mink and the otter, and it is as dangerous to attack him in the water as to fight a porcupine in his tree or a bear in his den.

The first of the pack was a yellow hound, who looked big and fierce enough to tackle anything. With a gasping bay, he ploughed forward, open-mouthed, to grip that silent, black-masked figure which floated so lightly in front of him — only to find it gone. At his plunge the raccoon had dived deep, a trick which no dog has yet learned. A second later, from behind, a slim sinewy hand closed like a clamp on the dog's foreleg, too far forward to be reached by his snapping jaws. As the hound

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lowered his head, vainly trying to bite, the raccoon reached across with his other paw, and gripped his opponent smotheringly by the muzzle.

Slowly, inexorably, he threw his weight against the dog's head, until it sank below the surface. As the other dogs approached, the coon manœuvred so that the struggling body was always between himself and his attackers. Never for an instant did he allow his prisoner's head to come to the surface. Suddenly he released it, and flashed back into the shadows. The body of the great hound floated on the surface, with gaping jaws and unseeing eyes.

Once more the coon dived and dragged down, with the same deadly grip, the smaller of his remaining opponents. This time he went under water with him. The dog struggled desperately, but paws have no chance against hands. Moreover, a raccoon can stay under water nearly five minutes, which is over a minute too long for any dog. When the coon at last appeared on the surface, he came up alone.

At that moment old Sam, aroused by the barking and baying of his dogs, hurried to the bank and called off his remaining hound, who was only too glad to swim away from the death in the dark, which had overtaken his pack mates. A moment later the victor was on his way back to the den-tree. The next morning, in a little inlet, where an eddy of the stream had cast them, Sam found the bodies of the dogs who had dared to give a raccoon the odds of the stream; and he swore to himself to kill that coon before snow flew.

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Many and many a time he tried. Everywhere the old Piny saw the tracks of the family, the front paws showing claw-marks, while the hind paws, set flat like those of a bear, made a print like a baby's bare foot. One track always showed three claws missing. Yet, hunt as he would, he could never surprise any of them again by day or night, while the many traps he sowed everywhere caught nothing.

One September night summer passed on, and the next morning there was the tang of frost in the air. The leaves of the sour-gum, the first tree to turn, showed blood-red. Day by day the woods gleamed, as the frost-fire leaped from tree to tree. The blueberry bushes ran in waves of wine along the ground, the sassafras was all sunshine-yellow, the white oaks old-gold, while the poison-ivy flaunted the regal red and yellow of Spain.

Before long, the Hunter's Moon of October was in the sky; and the night it was full, assembled the first coon-hunt of the season. Sam Carpenter was there, and Mose Butler came with his Grip, while Charlie Rogers brought Pet — famous coon dogs, which had never been known to run on a false scent. Came also old Hen Pine, with his famous gun. It had a barrel only about a foot long, for once, while hunting, the old man had slipped into a bog, plugging the muzzle of his gun with mud. The result was that the next time Hen fired it off, half the barrel disappeared. He claimed, however, that, barrel or no barrel, it was the best gun in the country, bar none. Anyway, a gun was only needed to frighten a treed

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coon into coming down, since the etiquette of a coon-hunt is the same as that of a fox-hunt — only the dogs must do the killing.

It was just before midnight when the party reached the dense woods where Sam Carpenter had so often seen the tracks of the Cleanlys. Early in the evening the little family had found a persimmon tree loaded down with sweet, puckery, orange-red fruit, and were ambling peacefully toward one of their father's hunting-lodges in an old crow's nest. They happened to pass the neck of woods nearest Sam's cabin just as the whole party entered it. Lanterns waved, men shouted, and dogs yipped and bayed among the trees, as they ran sniffing here and there, trying to locate a fresh trail.

The fierce chorus came to the hunted ones like a message of death and doom. If they scattered, some of the little coons would inevitably be overtaken by this pack of trained dogs, directed by veteran hunters. If they kept together, sooner or later they would be treed, and perhaps all perish. Once again the leader faced the last desperate duty of the father of a raccoon family. He dropped back to meet and hold the ranging pack until Mother Coon could hurry the little ones home by the tree-top route.

In another minute Nip, the last remaining dog of Sam's pack, caught the scent, and with a bay that echoed through the tangled thickets and across the dark pools of the marshland woods, dashed along the fresh trail. Then happened something which had never before befallen the luckless Nip in all his days

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and nights of hunting. From out of the thickets toward which the trail led rushed a black-masked figure, hardly to be seen in the gloom. Nip's triumphant bay changed to a dismayed yelp, as a set of sharp claws dug bloody furrows down his face and ripped his long silky ears to ribbons.

Before he could come to close grips his opponent had disappeared into the depths of a thicket, and Nip decided to wait for the rest of the pack. In a moment they joined him, with Grip and Pet leading. As they approached the thicket they, too, had the surprise of their lives. Contrary to all precedent a hunted coon, instead of running away, attacked them furiously. It was very irregular and disconcerting. Even as they were disentangling themselves from the clinging greenbrier and matted branches, they were gashed and slashed by an enemy who flashed in and out from the bit of open ground where he had waited for them. The leaders of the pack yelped and howled, and stopped, until reinforced and pressed forward by the slower dogs as they came up.

Little by little the old raccoon was forced back and compelled to make desperate dashes here and there, to avoid being surrounded. At last, he found himself driven beyond the area of the tangled thickets and into a stretch of open ground. Spreading out, the dogs hemmed him in on every side except one. Guarded on his flank by a long swale of the spiked greenbrier, he rushed along the one line left open to him, only to find himself in the open again. Just beyond him the cranberry growers had left a great

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sweet-gum tree which, with the lapse of years, had grown to an enormous size. As the pack closed around him, the coon made a dash for his refuge and scuttled up the trunk, while the dogs leaped high in the air, snapping at his very heels.

By the time the hunters came up, the whole clamoring pack, in a circle, was pawing at the tree. When the men saw that Pet and Grip and Nip, whose noses had never yet betrayed them, had their paws against the trunk with the rest, they decided that the coon had been treed, and was still treed, which did not always follow. The vast tree was too large around either to climb or to cut. Raising the lighted lantern which he carried, old Hen held it back of his head and stared straight up into the heart of the great gum. At last, sixty feet above the ground, against the blackness of the trunk showed two dots of flaming gold. They were the eyes of the raccoon, as it leaned out to stare down at the yellow blotch of light below.

Posting the dogs in a wide circle around the tree, the men built up a roaring fire and sat down to wait for the coming dawn. For long they talked and smoked and dozed over the fire, until at last a ghostly whiteness seemed to rise from the ground. Little by little the shadows paled, and the spectral tree-trunks showed more distinctly against the brightening sky, while crimson bars gleamed across the gateway of the east.

At the shouts of the men and the yelps and barks of the dogs below, the old coon stiffened and stared

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down at them unflinchingly. Hen Pine produced his cherished weapon. Aiming carefully above the treed animal he fired, and the heavy load splashed and crashed through the upper branches of the tree. Grimly the great raccoon faced his fate, as the scattering shot warned him that his only chance for life was on the ground. Slowly but unhesitatingly he moved down the side of the tree, while the dogs below bayed and howled and leaped high in the air. Beyond the dogs stood the men. In their faces showed no pity for the trapped animal, who must fight for his life against such fearful odds.

For a moment the coon looked down impassively at his foes. Then, just as the golden rim of the rising sun showed above the tree-tops, he turned like lightning and sprang out into mid-air, sideways, so that he would land close to the trunk of the tree. As he came through the air, spread out like a huge flying squirrel, his keen claws slashed back and forth as if he were limbering up for action. He struck the ground lightly and was met by a wave of dogs which swept him against the tree. There with his back guarded by the trunk he made his last stand.

At first, it seemed as if he would be overwhelmed as the howling pack dashed at him, but it was science against numbers. Perfectly balanced, he ducked and sidestepped like a lightweight champion in a street-fight, slashing with his long, keen claws so swiftly that not one of the worrying, crowded pack escaped. With flashing, tiny, imperceptible movements he avoided time and again the snaps and rushes

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of the best hounds there. Occasionally he would be slashed by their sharp teeth, and his grizzled coat was flecked here and there with blood; but it was difficult to secure a firm grip on his tough loose hide, and none of the hounds were able to secure the fatal throat-hold, or to clamp their jaws on one of those slender flashing paws.

For the most part, the old champion depended upon his long claws, which ripped bloody furrows every time they got home. Only in the clinches, when held for a moment by one or more of his opponents, did he use the forty fighting teeth with which he was equipped. When this happened, the dog who exchanged bites with him invariably got the worst of the bargain. The fighting was as fast as it was furious. In less than a minute two or three of the pack limped out of the circle with dreadful gashed throats or crunched and shattered paws. Then nothing could be seen but a many-colored mass, with the gray and black always on top. Suddenly it broke, and the great raccoon, torn and bleeding, but with an air of grim confidence, was alone with his back against the tree, while around him in an ever-widening circle the hounds backed away, yelping with pain.

The raccoon recovered his wind and, wily fighter that he was, changed his tactics. Without giving the dogs time to get back their lost courage, he suddenly dashed forward with a grating, terrifying snarl, the first sound that had come from him throughout the battle. As he rushed at them, his

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hair bristled until he seemed to swell to double his size.

For a second the ring held. Then with a yelp the nearest dog dived out of the way and scuttled off. His example was too much for the others. A second more, and the ring was broken and the dogs scattered. In vain the men tried to rally them again. They had resolved to have no further part or lot with that coon, who, without a backward look, moved stiffly and limpingly toward the nearest thicket.

Not until he had plunged into a tangle of greenbrier, where no dog could follow, did that pack recover its morale. Then indeed, safe outside the fierce thorns, they growled and barked and raved and told of the terrible things they would do to that coon — when they caught him.

Half an hour later, and half a league farther, from a great gum tree on the edge of a black silent stream, came the sound of soft, welcoming love-notes.

Father Coon was home again.

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II

BLACKBEAR

It was the high-water slack of summer. Up on Seven Mountains the woods were waves of deep lush green; and in the hot September sunshine the birds sang again, now that the moulting-moon of August had set. Yet there was an expectancy in the soft air. Shrill, sweet insect-notes, unheard before, multiplied. When the trees and the grass were all dappled with patches of dark and moonshine, the still air throbbed with the pulsing notes of the white tree-crickets; while above their range the high lilt of their black brethren thrilled without a pause, the unnoticed background of all other night-notes. From the bushes, which dripped moonlight in the clearings, a harsh voice occasionally said, solemnly, "Katy *did!*" A week later, all the open spaces on the fringe of the woods would be strident with the clicking choruses of the main host of the filmy green, long-winged insects, of which these stragglers were but the advance-guard.

One morning, from the emerald-green of a swamp maple, a single branch flamed out a crimson-red. The ebb of the year had begun. As the days shortened, imperceptibly the air became golden, and tasted of frost. Then through the lengthening nights the frost-fires began to blaze. The swamp

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maples deepened to a copper-red and ended a yolk-yellow. On the uplands, the sugar maples were all peach-red and yellow-ochre, and the antlers of the staghorn sumac were badged with old-gold and dragon's-blood red. The towering white ashes were vinous-purple, with an overlying bloom of slaty-violet, shading to a bronze-yellow. The scented trefoil leaves of the sassafras were all buttercup-yellow and peach-red, and the sturdy oaks were burnt-umber.

Richest of all were the robes of the red oaks. They were dyed a dull carmine-lake, while the narrow leaves of the beeches drifted down in sheaves of gamboge-yellow arrow-heads. Closer to the ground was the arrow-wood, whose straight branches the Indians used for arrow-shafts before the days of gunpowder. Its serrated leaves were a dull garnet. Lower still, the fleshy leaves of the pokeberry were all carmine-purple above and Tyrian rose beneath. Everywhere were the fragrant Indian-yellow leaves of the spice-bush, sweeter than any incense of man's making; while its berries, which cure fevers, were a dark, glossy red, quite different from the coral-red and orange berries of the bittersweet, with its straw-yellow leaves. The fierce barbed cat-brier showed leaves varying from a morocco-red to the lightest shade of yolk-yellow, at times attaining to pure scarlet, the only leaf of the forest so honored.

Through this riot of color, and along a web of dim trails, a great animal passed swiftly and soundlessly, dull black in color, save for a brownish muzzle and a

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white diamond-shaped patch in the centre of its vast chest. This color, the humped hind quarters, and the head swinging low on a long neck could belong to none other than the blackbear, the last survivor of the three great carnivora of our Eastern forests. It moved with a misleading loose-jointed gait, which seemed slow. Yet no man can keep ahead of a bear, as many a hunter has found to his cost.

Not so wise as the wolf, nor so fierce as the panther, the blackbear has outlived them both. "When in doubt, *run!*" is his motto; and, like Descartes, the wise blackbear founds his life on the doctrine of doubt. As for the unwise — they are dead. To be sure, even this saving rule of conduct would not keep him alive in these days of repeating rifles, were it not for his natural abilities. A bear can hear a hunter a quarter of a mile away, and scent one for over a mile if the wind be right. He may weigh three hundred pounds and be over two feet wide, yet he will slip like a shadow through tangled underbush, and feed all day safely in a berry-patch, with half a dozen hunters peering and hiding and lurking and looking for him.

To-day, as this particular bear faced the wind, it was evident from her smaller size and more pointed head that she was of the attractive sex. Her face was neither concave, like the grizzly bear, nor convex, like the polar bear, but showed almost straight lines; and as she stood there, black against the glowing background of the changing leaves, her legs, with their flat-set feet, seemed comically like the booted

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legs of some short fat man. The only part of the flaming color-scheme which appealed to her was that which she could eat. Purple plums of the sweet-viburnum, wild black bitter cherries, thick-skinned fox-grapes, shriveled rasping frost-grapes, huckleberries with their six crackling seeds, blueberries whose seeds are too small to be noticed — Mrs. Bear raked off quarts and gallons and barrels of them all with her great claws, yet never swallowed a green or imperfect one among the number. The fact that the bear is one of the Seven Sleepers accounted for the appetite of this one. Although the blackbear wears a fur coat four inches thick, and a waistcoat of fat of the same thickness, it has found that rent is cheaper than board, and spends the winter underground, living on the fat which it has stored up during the fall. Some of the Sleepers, like the chipmunk, take a light lunch to bed with them, in case they may be hungry during the long night, and fill a little storehouse before they turn in for their long winter nap. The bear and the woodchuck, however, prefer to act the part of the storehouse personally; all of which accounted for the appetite of this bear through the crisp fall days. Ordinarily a creature of the twilight and the early dawn, yet now she hunted through the broad daylight and far into the night, and devoured with the utmost enthusiasm food of all kinds by the hundredweight. Some of the selections on her menu-card would have been impossible to any other animal than the leather-lined blackbear, the champion animal sword-swallower.

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One warm September morning, she began her day with a gallon of berries which about exhausted the blueberry-patch where she had been feeding. Thereupon she started to wander along her fifteen-mile range, in seach for stronger food. She found it. In a damp part of the woods she dug up, and swallowed without flinching, many of the wrinkled flat bulbs of the wild arum or Jack-in-the-pulpit. The juice of these roots contains a multitude of keen microscopic crystals, which affect a human tongue like a mixture of sulphuric acid and powdered glass; nor does water assuage the pain in the least. Beyond the Jacks-in-the-pulpits grew clumps of the broad, juicy, ill-smelling leaves of the skunk-cabbage, which bears the first flower of the year. Mrs. Bear ate these greedily, although the tiniest drop of their corroding juice will blister the mouth of any human.

Beyond the skunk-cabbage patch, on a limb of a shadbush, she discovered a gray cone somewhat larger than a Rugby football, made of many layers of pulpy wood-fibre paper. In and out of an opening in the smaller end buzzed sullenly a procession of great, flat-faced, black-and-white hornets. No insect is treated with more respect by the wild folk than the hornet. Horses, dogs, and even men, have been killed by enraged swarms. Unlike the single-action bee, whose barbed sting can be used but once, the hornet is a repeater. It can and will sting as early and as often as circumstances demand, and is most liberal in its estimate. Moreover, every sting is as painful as a bullet from a small-calibre

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revolver. Yet the bear approached the nest without any hesitation and, rearing up on her hind quarters, with one scoop of her paw brought the oval to the ground and was instantly enshrouded in a furious, buzzing, stinging cloud. Unmoved by their attacks, the imperturbable animal proceeded to gobble down both the nest and its contents, licking up grubs, half-grown hornets, and full-armed fighters alike, with her long flexible tongue, and swallowing great masses of the gray soft paper. When at last only a few scattered survivors were left, she lumbered off and followed a path which, like all bear-trails, led at last to one of the dry, pleasant, wind-swept hillsides that the bear-people love so well. There she spent a happy hour before a vast ant-hill erected by fierce red-and-black soldier ants. Sinking first one fore-paw and then the other deep into the loose earth, she would draw them out covered with swarming, biting ants, which she carefully licked off, evidently relishing their stinging, sour taste.

Thereafter, filled full of berries, bulbs, skunk-cabbage, hornets, and ants, Mrs. Bear decided to call it a day, and curled herself up to sleep under the roots of a fallen pine.

Another day she discovered groves of oak trees loaded down with acorns. Better than any botanist she knew which were sweetest; and for a week she ate acorns from the white oaks, the tips of whose leaves are rounded, and the chestnut-oaks, whose leaves are serrated like those of the chestnut tree. Then came a morning when, from a far-away valley,

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floated a sound which sent her hurrying down from her tree, although it was only the bell-like note of the flappy-cared hound which belonged to Rashe Weeden, the trapper, who lived in the Hollow. Yet the bear knew that a hound meant a hunter, and that a hunter meant death. Only a straightaway run for miles and hours could save her, if the hound were on her trail. Weeks of feasting had left her in no condition for any such Marathon work.

Yet somewhere, during the hard-earned years of her long life, she had learned another answer to this attack of the trailing hound. Down the mountain-side, straight toward the approaching dog she hurried, following a deeply marked path. It led directly under the overhanging branch of a great red oak. She followed it beyond the tree, and then doubled and, directly under the limb, circled and confused the trail. Then, still following her back track, she passed the tree and, returning to it by a long detour, climbed it from the farther side, and in a moment was hidden among the leaves. Nearer and nearer came the tuneful note of the hunting dog who had betrayed so many and many of the wood-folk to their death. Suddenly, as he caught the fresh scent, his voice went up half an octave, and he rushed along the faint path until he reached the red-oak tree. There he paused to puzzle out the tangled trail. As he sniffed back and forth under the over-hanging limb, there was a tiny rustle in the leaves above him, hardly as loud as a squirrel would make. Then a black mass shot down like a pile-driver, a sheer

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twenty feet. The hound never knew what struck him, and it was not until an hour later that Rashe Weeden found his flattened carcass.

"Looked as if he'd been stepped on by one of them circus elephants," he confided afterwards to old Fred Dean, who lived over on the Barrack, near him.

"Elephants be mighty scurce on Seven Mountains," objected the old man; and the passing of that hound remains a mystery on the Barrack to this day.

One bitter gray afternoon, when the flaming leaves had died down to dull browns and ochres, word came to the wild folk that winter was on its way to Seven Mountains. Little flurries of stinging snow whirled through the air, and the wind shrieked across the marshland where the bear was still hunting for food. As the long grass of the tussocks streamed out like tow-colored hair, she shambled deep into the nearest wood, until behind the massed tree-trunks she was safe from the fierce fingers of the north wind, which howled like a wolf overhead. From that day she stopped the search for food and started house-hunting. Back and forth, up and down the mountains, in and out of the swamps, across the uplands and along the edges of the hills, she hurried for days at a time.

At last, on a dry slope, she found what she wanted. Deep in the withered grass showed a vast chestnut stump. Starting above this on the slope, in the very centre of a tangled thicket she dug a slanting tunnel. The entrance was narrow, like the neck of a jug, and was so small that it did not seem possible that the

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bear could ever push her huge shoulders through. When it reached the stump, however, it widened out into an oval chamber partly walled in by buttressed roots. Against the slope she dug a wide flat shelf, which she covered deep with dry leaves and soft grass, and sank beside the stump a small air-hole, which led into the lower end of the burrow. With the same skill with which she had picked and sorted berries, with her huge paws she removed every trace of the fresh earth displaced by her digging. Then she piled loose brush neatly around the entrance to the burrow, and crawled in. Turning around at the foot of the tunnel, she crept back head-first and, reaching out her paw, carefully corked the jug with the brush which she dragged deep over the opening. Then, six feet underground, on her dry warm bed, she curled up for a four months' nap.

As the winter days set in, the driving snow drifted deep against the stump, until even the thicket above it was hidden. Then came the bitter cold. There were long days and nights when there was not a breath of wind, and the mercury went down below all readings in the settlements. In the forests and on the mountains great boulders burst apart, and in places the frozen ground split open in narrow cracks a hundred feet long. Life was a bitter, losing fight against cold and hunger for many of the wood-dwellers; but, six feet underground, the bear slept safe, at truce with both of these ancient foes of the wild folk, while the warm vapor of her breath, freezing, sealed the sides of her cell with solid ice. Not until spring un-

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locked the door, would she leave that little room again.

Yet, in January, although the door was still locked by the snow and barred by the ice, two tiny bearlings found their way in. They were blind and bare, and both of them could have been held at once on the palm of a man's hand. Yet Mrs. Bear was convinced that there had never been such a beautiful and talented pair. She licked their pink little bodies and nursed them and cuddled them, and the long freezing months were all too short to show the full measure of her mother-love. As the weeks went by, they became bigger and bigger. When they were hungry, which was most of the time, they whimpered and nuzzled like little puppies, and pushed and hurried and crowded, lest they might starve to death before they could reach those fountains of warm milk which flowed so unfailingly for them. When they were both full-fed, Mother Bear would arch her vast bulk over them, and they would sleep through the long dreamy, happy hours, wrapped up warm in her soft fur.

Then, one day — the fortieth after their arrival — a great event occurred. Both the cubs opened their eyes. There was not much to see, but the old bear licked them ecstatically, much impressed by this new proof of their genius. From that time on, they grew apace, and every day waxed stronger and friskier. Sometimes they would stand up and box like fly-weight champions, and clinch and wrestle and tumble around and over the old bear, until she would sweep

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them both off their feet with one turn of her great paw, and they would all cuddle down together for a long nap.

Then came the Call. Perhaps it was the contralto note of the bluebird from mid-sky, or the clanging cry of the wild geese going north; or it might have been the scent of the trailing arbutus that came through the solid walls of that little room. At any rate, deep underground, beneath snow and ice and frozen brush, the little family knew that spring had come. The cubs began to sniff and claw at the ice-bound walls, and the old bear heaved her great bulk up and circled the little cell uneasily.

Then, all in an hour, came the thaw. The ice melted and the snow disappeared, until, one April day, with a slash of her paw the old bear opened the door, and the whole family stumbled out into the blue dawn of a spring day. Around them sounded the sweet minor notes of the white-throated sparrows, and the jingling songs of the snowbirds; while over on a sun-warmed slope a flock of tree-sparrows, on their way to the Arctic Circle, sang a chorus like the tinkling of icicles.

The old bear stood long in the bright sunlight, sniffing and staring with unseeing eyes—then lurched down to a little mountain stream a hundred yards away, followed in small procession by her cubs. Once arrived at the brook, she drank and drank and drank, until it seemed as if her legs would double under her. After she had filled herself to the bursting-point, the cubs had their first taste of water.

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It seemed to them thin, cold, unstable stuff compared with what they had been drinking. Their birthplace once abandoned, they never returned to it. Thereafter they slept wherever and whenever the old bear was sleepy, cuddled in her vast arms and against her warm fur.

That day, as they turned away from the brook, Mother Bear stopped and stared long at the larger of her two cubs. Unlike the dull black of his smaller sister, he was a rich cinnamon-brown in color. In years past there had been a red cub in her family, and once even a short-lived straw-yellow youngster; but this was her first experience with a brownie, and the old bear grunted doubtfully as she led the way up the mountainside.

At last and at last came the golden month of the wild folk — honey-sweet May, when the birds come back, and the flowers come out, and the air is full of the sunrise scents and songs of the dawning year. The woods were white with the long snowy petals of the shad-blow, and purple with amethyst masses of rhodora, when the old bear began the education of her cubs. Safety, Food, More Food comprised the courses in her curriculum. Less and less often did she nurse them, as she taught them to find a variety of pleasant foods. Because Mother Bear knew that disobedience was death, she was a stern disciplinarian. On their very first walk, Blackie, the littlest of the family, found it difficult to keep up with the old bear's swinging gait. Little bears that fall behind often disappear. Accordingly, when Blackie finally

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caught up, she received a cuff which, although it made her bawl, taught her not to lag.

Brownie erred in the opposite direction. Big and strong and confident, he once pushed ahead of his mother, along a trail that led up a mountain-gorge where the soft deep mosses held the water like green sponges. Suddenly, just as he was about to put his small paw into a great bear-print in the moss, he received a left-hand swing which sent him spinning off the trail into a tree-trunk, with the breath knocked clear out of his small body. Then the old bear showed him what may happen to cubs who think they know more than their mothers. From deep under the moss, she had caught a whiff of the death-scent of man. Reaching out beyond the trail, she raised without an effort, on a derrick-like forepaw, a section of a dead tree-trunk, a foot in diameter, and sent it squattering down full upon the paw-print. As the end of the log sank in the moss, there was a fierce snap, and a series of sharp and dreadful steel teeth clamped deep into the decayed wood. Rashe Weeden, the trapper, who trapped bears at all seasons of the year, had dug up a section of moss containing the bear-imprint, and underneath it had set a hellish double-spring bear-trap. Let man or beast step ever so lightly on the print which rested on the broad pan of the trap, and two stiff springs were released. Once locked in the living flesh, the teeth would cut through muscle and sinew, and crush the bones of anything living, while the double-spring held them locked. A vast clog chained to the trap kept the tortured animal from

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going far, and a week later the victim would welcome the coming of the trapper and the swift death he brought.

A few days later the little family saw an object lesson of what humans do to bears, and what such a trap meant to them. They were following one of the bear-paths which always lead sooner or later to hillsides where there are berries and a view and no flies. Suddenly the wind brought to the ears of the old bear the sound of sobbing. She stopped and winnowed the air carefully through her sensitive nose. There was the scent of bear, but no taint of man in the breeze, and she followed the trail toward where the strange noises came from, around a bend in the path. More and more slowly, and with every caution, she moved forward, while her two cubs kept close behind like little shadows. As the path opened into a little natural clearing, all three of them saw a horrifying sight. There in front of them lay another smaller, younger mother-bear. The cruel fanged jaws of a trap were sunk deep into her shattered left foreshoulder, while the clog was caught under a stump. The prisoned animal had tugged and dragged and pulled, evidently for long days and nights, as the ground was torn up for yards and yards around her. At last, worn out by exhaustion and the unceasing, fretting, festering pain of the gripping jaws, the captive had sunk down hopelessly to the ground, and from time to time cried out with a shuddering sobbing note. Her glazed, beseeching eyes had a bewildered look, as if she wondered why this horror had

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come to her. At her knees a little cub stood, and whimpered like a sorrowful baby and then raised his little paws trustingly against the huge bulk of his mother, who could help him no more. Another cub had climbed into a little tree overhead, and looked down in wonder at the sorrowful sight below.

The old bear took one long look while her cubs, terrified, crowded close up against her. Then she turned, and plunged into the depths of the nearest thicket. There was nothing to be done for the trapped one, and she knew that, soon or late, death would stalk along the trail which she had just left. Later that afternoon, when they were miles from the place, the old bear's keen ear heard two distant shots from far away across the mountain-ridges. As the twilight deepened, she led her little family out in a search for food. All at once there came from below them a strange little distress-note, which made Mother Bear stop and look anxiously around to see if both of her cubs were safe. Again it sounded, much nearer, and then from among the trees a small dark animal hurried toward them. It was one of the cubs they had seen earlier in the afternoon, escaped from the death which had overtaken the others, running wailing and lonely through the darkening woods, looking for its lost mother. At the sight of Mother Bear, it gave a little whicker of relief and delight, and ran straight to her and nuzzled hungrily under her warm fur, quite as if it had a right to be there. Although the old bear growled a little at first, she was not proof against the entreating whines

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of the little newcomer. As for her own cubs, after carefully sniffing this new sister over and finding her blacker even than Blackie, with a funny white spot near the end of her small nose, they decided to recognize her as part of the family. In another minute Spotty was feeding beside Blackie, and from that day forward the old bear was trailed by three cubs instead of two.

As summer approached, Mother Bear weaned her family and showed them how to get their living from the land, as she did. She taught them all about ants' nests and grubs, and showed them a score or so of sweet and succulent roots. Only the root of the water-hemlock, with its swollen, purple-streaked stem which tastes so sweet and is so deadly, she taught them to avoid, as well as those fierce and fatal sisters among the mushrooms, the death-angel and the fly-mushroom, whose stems grow out of a socket, the danger-signal of their family.

Teaching the cubs to enjoy yellow-jackets' nests, one of the delicacies on bear-menus, was a more difficult affair. At first, Blackie and Spotty, after being stung on their soft little noses, would have no further traffic with any such red-hot dainties. Brownie was made of sterner stuff. After he had once learned how good yellow-jacket grubs were, he hunted everywhere for the nests. When he found one, he would dig it out, while the yellow-jackets stung his nose until the pain became unendurable. Then he would sit up and rub the end of it with both paws and bawl with all his might, only to start dig-

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ging again when the smart became bearable. Sometimes he would have to stop and squeal frantically three or four times, to relieve his feelings — but he always finished the very last grub.

When the weather grew warmer, the old bear took all the cubs down to the edge of a hidden mountain-lake, and there taught them, one by one, to swim, hiding the others safely on the bank. At first, Mother Bear would allow each little swimmer to grip the end of her five-inch tail, and be towed through the water. As soon, however, as they learned the stroke, they had to paddle for themselves. One warm afternoon lazy Brownie swam with her to the middle of the lake, and then tried to get a tow back, only to receive a cuff that sent him two feet under water. When he came to the surface again, he swam beside his mother as bravely as if he had been born an otter and not a bear-cub.

When they were still a long distance from the shore, the old bear raised her big black head out of the water and stared over toward a little bay half a mile away. Her keen nostrils had caught the scent of man across the still waters. Then, to his surprise, Brownie was again given the privilege of a tow, and found himself whirling shoreward at a tremendous rate. From the far-away inlet a lean, lithe canoe flashed toward them as fast as Steve O'Donnell, the lumberjack, could paddle. Steve had come over to the lake to estimate on some lumber, and had seen the swimming bears. Hurriedly pitching into the canoe the long, light, almost straight-handled axe,

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which was the article of faith of all the woodcutters of that region, he started out to overtake the fugitives.

Steve was not learned in bear-ways, or he would never have started in a canoe after a swimming bear, without a rifle. As he came nearer and nearer, and it became evident to the old bear that she would be overtaken before she could reach shore, she turned and swam unhesitatingly toward the canoe, while Brownie made the best of his way ashore. Steve dropped his paddle and seized his axe, and when the great head was close beside his craft, struck at it with all his strength. He had yet to learn that the bear is an unsurpassed boxer, and that few men are able to land a blow on one, even when swimming. As his axe whizzed downward, it was suddenly deflected by a left turn, given with such force that the axe was torn from the man's hands and disappeared in the deep water. The next instant both the bear's paws clutched the gunwale of the canoe, and a second later Steve was swimming for his life in the cold water. Mrs. Bear paid no further attention to him, but started again for the nearest shore. Overtaking Brownie, she gave him another tow, and by the time Steve, chilled to the bone, reached the farther shore, the whole bear family was miles away.

By midsummer the cubs were half-grown, although they looked mostly legs. One summer twilight a strange thing happened. The family had reached one of their safe and pleasant hillsides, when there loomed up before them a vast black figure among

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the trees, and out into the open strode a blackbear of a size that none of the three little cubs had ever seen before. In their wanderings they had met many other bears. Most of these the old bear passed unseeingly, in accordance with bear etiquette. Sometimes, if the stranger came too close, the hair on Mother Bear's back would begin to bristle, and a deep, threatening rumble, that seemed to come from underground, would warn against any nearer approach.

To-night, however, when this newcomer lumbered up to the cubs, who shrank behind their mother, Mother Bear made no protest. He sniffed at them thoughtfully, and then said loudly, "Koff — koff — koff — koff." Mother Bear seemed entirely satisfied with this sentiment, and from that time on the stranger led the little band, and the cubs came to know that he was none other than Father Bear. Bears mate only every other year; but often a couple will join forces in the odd year, and wander together as a family until winter.

Father Bear was a giant among his kind. He would tip the scales at perhaps five hundred pounds, and stood over three feet high at his foreshoulders, and was between six and seven feet long. In all the emergencies and crises of everyday life, he showed himself always a very present help in every time of trouble. Warier and wiser even than Mother Bear, he piloted his little family into the wildest and loneliest corners of all that wild and lonely land. Not for many years had the old giant met his match.

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Of panther, Canada lynx, porcupine, wolf, wolverine, and all the bears, black and brown, for a hundred miles around, he was the acknowledged overlord. This sense of power gave him a certain grim confidence, and he hunted and foraged for his family, with none to hinder save only man, the king of beasts. Crafty as he was powerful, the old bear fled into his most inaccessible fastnesses at the slightest taint or trace of that death-bringer.

One curious custom he had. Whenever he approached certain trees in his usual fifteen-mile range, he would examine them with great care for several minutes. These trees always stood in a prominent place, and were deeply scarred and furrowed with tooth-marks and claw-marks. Father Bear, after looking them all over carefully, would sniff every recent mark gravely. With his head on one side, he seemed to be receiving and considering messages from unseen senders. Occasionally the news that the tree brought seemed to enrage him profoundly. Thereupon he would claw and chew the unoffending tree frothingly, and then trot away growling deep in his throat. At other times, he would raise his ears politely, as if recognizing a friend; or wrinkle his nose doubtfully but courteously, as a well-bred bear might do who met a stranger. Always, however, before leaving, he would stand up on his hind quarters and claw the tree as high as he could reach, at the same time drawing his teeth across it at right angles to the vertical claw-marks. The cubs soon learned that these lone, marked trees were bear-postoffices

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and that it was the duty of every he-bear of any real bearhood to leave a message there, with tooth and claw, for friend and foe to read.

When September came again, the family found themselves ranging far to the north, in a country which the cubs had never seen before. There they saw in the soft moss the deep marks of great splay hoofs; while here and there the bark of the striped maple was torn off in long strips seven or eight feet from the ground, and always on only one side, so that the half-peeled tree never died, as did the girdled trees attacked by the porcupine. One of the slow migrations of the moose-folk, which take place only at intervals of many years, had set in. Drifting down from the Far North, scattered herds had invaded the old bear's northernmost range. Like the witch-hazel, which blooms last of all the shrubs, the love-moon of the moose rises in the fall. The males of that folk take hardly the stress and strain of courtship. Bad-tempered at the best, a bull-moose is a devil unchained in September. As the hunter's moon waxes in the frosty sky, he neither rests, eats, nor sleeps, but wanders night and day through the woods in search of a mate. Woe be to man or beast who meets him then!

As the afterglow died out at the end of one of the shortening September days, the bear family heard faintly from a far-away hillside a short bellowing "Oh-ah! oh-ah! oh-ah!" Suddenly, not two hundred yards away, on a hardwood ridge, came back a long ringing, mooing call, which sounded like "Who-are-

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BULL MOOSE AND BLACKBEAR

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you! who-are-you!" It was the answer of the cow-moose to her distant would-be lover. At the sound, the ears of the great bear pricked up, and his deep-set, little eyes twinkled fiercely in the fading light. Without a sound, he shambled swiftly into the swamp toward the call. Hesitating for a moment, Mother Bear followed him, and close behind her trailed the usual procession. The frost in the air and the call, vibrant and pulsing with warm life, had made the old bear hungry for fresh meat. Unfortunately for him, as he approached the little ridge, a tiny breeze sprang up. As the sensitive nostrils of the young cow-moose caught the scent of danger, she drifted away into the woods like a shadow, and was gone.

When the bear reached the ridge, he could not be convinced that she had escaped. Everywhere lingered the warm delicious scent, so fresh that his great jaws dripped as he glided silently and swiftly through the thickets. Then, as he hunted, suddenly, silently, a vast bulk heaved into view, looming high and huge and black above the saplings and against the last red streak of the darkening sky. The cubs shrank close to their mother, and she discreetly retired into the far background, as into the clearing strode an enormous black beast with a brown head and white legs, and with a long tassel of hair swinging from its throat. Seven feet high at the shoulder, and more than ten feet from tail to muzzle, stood the great bull-moose. The antlers measured seven feet from tip to tip. With their vast, flat, palmated

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spread, with eight curved, sharp prongs in front, a strong man could not have carried them. Yet the moose switched them as easily as a girl might settle her hat with a toss of her head.

At the sight of the prowling blackbear, all the devilish temper of the thwarted, seeking, brooding bull broke loose. His deep-set, wicked little eyes burned red, and with a roaring bellow he whirled up his vast bulk over the bear. Ordinarily the bear would not have waited for any trouble with a bull-moose in the month of September. To-night, however, he was on his own range. Behind him watched his mate and his cubs. The moose was a stranger and a trespasser. Morever, the blood-hunger had seized upon the bear, and a bear that sees red is one of the most dangerous opponents on earth. Throwing himself back upon his massive haunches, he prepared for a fight to the finish. A moose more experienced in bear-ways would have relied chiefly on his antlers, whose sharp, twisted prongs would cut and tear, while the immense flat plates of spreading horn were shields against any effective counter-stroke. This particular bull-moose, however, had never before met any opponent other than a moose who would await his attack, and he did not know what a deadly infighter a bear is. His only thought was to settle the battle before the other could escape. With a bellowing squeal of rage, he pivoted on his hind legs and struck two pile-driving blows, one after the other, with his ponderous keen-edged hoofs. Such a

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blow would have disemboweled a wolf, or killed a man, or even have shattered the huge bulk of another moose, if once they had landed full and fair.

Just as the moose struck, the bear slipped forward and, sudden as the smashing leads came, they were not so swift as the lightning-like parries. As each fatal hoof came whizzing down, it was met at its side by a deft snap of a powerful shaggy forearm, and glanced harmlessly off the bear's mighty shoulders. The force of the leads and the drive of the parries threw the bull off his balance, and for a moment he staggered forward on his knees, pushing against the ground with antlers and forelegs, to regain his balance.

That tiny tick of time, however, was all that the old bear needed. With the dreadful coughing roar that a bear gives when fighting for his life, he pivoted toward the right on his humped-up haunches. Swinging back his enormous left paw, armed with a cestus of steel-like claws, he delivered the crashing, smashing swing that only a bear can give, one of the most terrible blows known to beasts or man. Every ounce of strength in the ridged forepaw, every atom of force and spring from the coiled masses of humped muscles of the enormous hind quarters, went into that mighty blow. It landed full and fair on the long neck, just back of the flat cheek-bone. The weight of the moose approached a ton. Yet that dreadful shattering smash whirled the great head around like a feather.

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There was a snap, a rending crack, and the whole vast beast toppled over on his side, and, with one long convulsive shudder, lay dead, his neck broken under the impact of that terrible counter. The old bear rolled forward, but the black bulk never quivered as he towered over his fallen foe, still the king of his range.

All that fall the five kept together. Then, one day in November, their leader disappeared. Mother Bear showed no anxiety, for she knew that late to bed and early to rise is the motto of all he-bears, and that her mate had left her only because he intended to stay up for weeks after his family were asleep for the winter. Far up on the mountainside the four found a dry cave with a tiny entrance, and spent the winter there together.

When spring came again, the cubs were cubs no longer. Without Mother Bear's bulk or shagginess, yet all three of them were sleek, powerful, full-grown bears instead of the sprawly, leggy cubs of the season before. Brownie was still the largest, but Spotty, the starved, whimpering little cub of a year ago, was a close second to him. Not so massive nor so powerful, yet she had a supple, sure swiftness that made her his equal in their unceasing hunts for food. Hurry as he would, a slim black nose with a silver spot near the end would often be thrust in just ahead of him. There must have been some charm about that spot, because Brownie never got angry, although usually any interference with a bear's food is a fighting act.

As the weeks wore on toward summer, Blackie

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became every day more snappish. She growled if Brownie came near her. Mother Bear also began to develop a temper. Then came a warm night in late spring, when both Blackie and Spotty disappeared. Brownie sniffed and searched and hunted but no trace of either of them could he find. As the days lengthened into June, the old bear became restless and more and more irritable. One day in the middle of the month, she wandered back and forth, feeding but little, and so cross that Brownie followed her only at a safe distance. He, too, was uneasy and unhappy. Something, he knew not what, was lacking in his life. As the late twilight faded, a great honey-colored moon came up and made the woods so bright that the veeries began to sing again their strange rippling chords, as if the night-wind were blowing across golden harp-strings.

There before them, in a little glade, suddenly towered the black figure of a giant bear. With a little whicker Mother Bear moved forward to meet her mate, and a moment later led the way toward the dim green fastnesses of the forest. Poor, untactful, unhappy Brownie started to follow as of old. Both of them growled at him so fiercely that he stopped in his tracks. As he watched them disappear into the fragrant dark, he felt that the whole Round Table was dissolved. Never again would the little family that had been so happy together be united.

He turned and plunged into a near-by thicket, and hurried away lonely and unhappy. For long he

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followed a faint trail, until it widened into a green circle where some forgotten charcoal-pit had stamped its seal forever upon the forest. The air was heavy with the drugged perfume of chestnut tassels and the fragrance of wild grape, sweetest of all the scents of earth. Then, under the love-moon of June, in the centre of the tiny circle, there was standing before him a lithe, black figure with a silver spot showing at the end of her slim tilted nose — and all at once Brownie knew what his life had lacked. For long and long the two looked at each other, and he was lonely and unhappy no more.

Then slowly, slowly, the silver spot moved away, ahead of him, toward the soft scented blackness of the deep woods. As he followed, he stopped and rumbled out dreadful warnings to a large number of imaginary bears, to beware that silver spot. While the veeries, whose heartstrings are a lute, sang in the thicket, and a little owl crooned a love-song from overhead, and the last of the hylas piped like pixies from far away, the two followed the path of their honeymoon, until it was lost in the depths of that night of love.

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III

THE SEVENTH SLEEPER

In a far northwestern corner of Connecticut, the twenty-one named hills of Cornwall slept deep under the snow. At the north lay the Barrack, a lonely coffin-shaped hill, where, in the deep woods on the top, lived old Rashe Howe and his wife, snowbound from December until March. Never since the day that he journeyed to New York to hear Jenny Lind sing, a half-century ago, had she spoken to him.

Two miles beyond, Myron Prindle and Mrs. Prindle lived on the bare top of Prindle Hill, where in summer the hermit thrushes sang, and in hidden bogs bloomed the pink-and-white lady-slipper, loveliest and loneliest of all of our orchids. Then there were Lion's Head, and Rattlesnake Mountain, where that king of the dark places of the forest had a den. Beyond towered the Cobble, a steep cone-shaped hill, which, a century ago, Great-great Uncle Samuel Sedgwick used to plough clear to the top. He relied upon three yoke of oxen and the Sedgwick temper; and on calm mornings could be heard discoursing to said oxen from the top of the Cobble in three different towns.

Over beyond the Cobble was Dibble Hill, with its lost settlement of five deserted houses crumbling in the woods. Coltsfoot, Green Mountain, and Bally-

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hack stretched away to the south and the west; and in the northwest was Gold Mountain, with its abandoned gold-mine, from which Deacon Wadsworth mined just enough gold to pay for sinking the shaft. Then came Blakesley Hill, climbed by a winding road three miles long, and Ford Hill, populated by Silas Ford and twelve little Fords, and Bunker Hill, traversed by the Crooked S's, which drove motorists to madness.

Beyond them all was Great Hill, where grew the enormous tree which could be seen against the sky-line for ten miles around. Six generations of Cornwall people had planned to walk or drive or motor, on some day, that never dawned, and look at that tree and find out what it was. Some claimed that it was an elm, like the vast Boundary Elm which marked a corner where four farms met. Others believed it to be a red oak; while still others claimed the honor for a button-ball. But no one yet has ever known for certain. In the very centre and heart of all the other hills was Cream Hill, greenest, richest, and roundest of them all. On its flanks were Cornwall Plains, Cornwall Centre, and Cornwall Hollow; and at its foot nestled Cream Pond, with Pond Hill sloping straight skyward from its northern shore.

Ever since November, Cream Hill had been in the clutch of winter. There had been long nights when the cold stars flared and flamed in a black-violet sky, and the snow showed cobalt-blue against the dark tree-trunks. Then came the storm. For three days the north wind swept, howling like a wolf, down

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from the far-away Catskills, whirling the lashing, stinging snow into drifts ten feet deep. Safe and warm in great white farmhouses, built to stand for centuries, human-folk stayed stormbound. In the morning, again at noon, and once more in the gray twilight, the men would plough their way through the drifts to the barns, and feed and water the patient oxen, the horses stamping in their stalls, the cows in stanchions, and the chickens, which stayed on their roosts all through the darkened days. In field and forest the Seven Sleepers slept safe and warm until spring, but the rest of the wild folk were not at truce with winter but, hunger-driven, must play at hide-and-seek with foe and food. Everywhere on the surface of the snow the writings of their foot-prints appeared and reappeared, as they were swept away by the wind or blotted out by the falling flakes.

Finally, the storm raged itself out, and by the afternoon of the third day, the white unwritten page of the snow lay across hill and lake and valley. The next morning it was scribbled and scrawled all over with stories of the life which had pulsed and ebbed and passed among the silent trees and across the snowbound meadows. Wherever the weed-stalks had spread a banquet of seeds, there were delicate trails and traceries. Some of them were made up of tiny, trident tracks where the birds had fed — juncos with their white skirts and light beaks, tree-sparrows with red topknots and narrow white wing-bars, and flocks of redpolls down from the Arctic Circle, whose rosy breasts looked like peach-blossoms scattered

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upon the white snow. Hundreds of larger patterns showed where the mice-folk had feasted and frolicked all the long night through. Down under the snow, their tunnels ran in mazes and labyrinths, with openings at every weed-stalk up which they could climb in hurrying groups into the outside world. Some of the trails were lines of little paw-prints separated by a long groove in the snow. These were the tracks of the deer-mice, whose backs are the color of pine-needles, and who wear white silk waistcoats and silk stockings and have pink paws and big flappy ears and lustrous black eyes. The groove was the mark of their long slender tails. Near them were lines of slightly larger paw-prints, with only occasional tail-marks — the trail of the sturdy, short-tailed, round-headed meadow-mouse.

Here and there were double rows of tiny exclamation points, separated by a tail-mark. Wherever this track approached the mazes of the mice paw-prints, the latter scattered out like the spokes of a wheel. This strange track was that of the masked shrew, the smallest mammal in the world, a tiny, blind death, whose doom it is to devour its own weight in flesh and blood every twenty-four hours. Another track showed like a tunnel, with its concave surface stamped with zigzag paw-marks. It was the trail of the blarina shrew, which twisted here and there as if a snake had writhed its way through the powdered snow. Again, all other tracks radiated away from it; for the blarina is braver and bigger and fiercer than its little blood-brother, the masked shrew.

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Everywhere, across the fields and through the swamps and in and out of the woods, was another track, made up of four holes in the snow, two far-apart and two near-together. Overhead at night in the cold sky, below those star-jewels, Mintaka, Alnilam, and Alnita, which gleam in the belt of Orion, the same track appears where four stars form the constellation of Lepus the Hare. Down on Connecticut earth, however, the mark was that of the cottontail rabbit.

Among the many snow-stories which showed that morning was one tragedy written red. It began with the trail of one of the cottontails. At first, the near-together holes were in front of the others. That marked where Bunny had been hopping leisurely along, his short close-set forepaws making the near-together holes and his long far-apart hind paws the others. At times, where the trail led in the lee of thick bushes, a fifth mark would appear. This was the print of the powder-puff that the rabbit wears for a tail, and showed where he had sat down to rest or meditate in the snow. Suddenly, the wide-apart marks appeared far in front of the other two. For some reason the rabbit had speeded up his pace, and with every spring his long hind legs had thrust themselves beyond and outside of the short forepaws. A little farther along, the tracks of the two forepaws showed close to each other, in a vertical instead of a horizontal line. This meant to him who could read the writing that the rabbit was running at a desperate speed. At the end of every bound he had twisted

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each forepaw inward, so as to thrust them out with the greatest possible leverage.

The trail zigzagged here and there and doubled back upon itself and crossed and turned and circled. The snow said that the rabbit had been running for his life, and every twist and turn told of the desperation and dumb despair of his flight. Yet nowhere was there the print of any pursuer. At last, in a little opening among the bushes, the trail ended in a circle of trampled, ridged, and reddened snow. At the very edge of the blood-stains a great X was stamped deep. Farther on was the end of that snow-story — the torn, half-eaten body of the rabbit, which had run a losing race with death. Again, to him who could read the writing on the snow the record was a plain one. The X is the sign and seal of the owl-folk, just as a K is the mark of the hawk-people. On silent, muffled wings, the great horned owl, fiercest of all the sky-pirates, had hunted down poor Cottontail. All his speed, his twistings and turnings and crafty doublings, availed him not against the swift flight and cruel, curved talons of this winged death.

Around the trees were other series of tracks, which went in fours, something like the rabbit-tracks in miniature, except that they showed tiny claw-marks. These were where the gray squirrels had ventured out to dig under the snow, to find nuts which they had buried in the fall, or where their more thrifty cousins, the red squirrels, had sallied forth to look up hidden hoards in the lee of rocks and in hollow trees.

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Crossing and recrossing fields and forests in long straight lines were the trails of hunting foxes. The neat, clearly stamped prints, with never a mark of a dragging paw, and the fact that they did not spraddle out from a straight line, distinguished them from dog-tracks, Along the brooks were the four- and five-fingered prints of the muskrat, showing on either side of a tail-mark; and occasionally the double foot-prints of that killer, the weasel, and the rarer trail of his cousin, the mink. Only the signatures of the Seven Sleepers were absent from the smooth page. The bear and the bat, the woodchuck and the chipmunk, the raccoon, the jumping-mouse, and the skunk were all in bed.

As the sun rose higher and higher on the first day after the storm, the sky showed as blue and soft as in June, and at sunset the whole western heavens seemed to open in a blaze of fiery amber. There were strips of sapphire-blue and pools of beryl-green, while above was a spindrift of flame the color of the terrible crystal. That night the mercury crept up higher and higher in the thermometer that hung outside of Silas Dean's store at Cornwall Centre. A little screech-owl thought that spring had come, and changed his wailing call to the croon which belongs to the love-month of May, and the air was full of the tinkle and drip and gurgle of the thaw.

The next morning, in the wet snow a new trail appeared — a long chain of slender delicate close-set tracks, like a pattern of intricate stitches. The last of the Sleepers was awake, for the close-set paw-

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prints were none other than those of the unhasting skunk. "Don't hurry, others will," is his motto. It was just at dawn of the second day of the thaw that he appeared in the sunlight. All night long he had wandered slowly and sedately in and out of a circle not over two hundred yards in diameter. In spite, however, of his preoccupied manner and unhurried ways, there was not much that was edible which he had overlooked throughout his range; and now, at sunrise, which was his bedtime, he was on his way home.

The rays of the rising sun blazoned to the world the details of his impressive personality. His most noticeable and overshadowing feature was his huge, resplendent tail. It waved like a black and white banner over his broad back. Throughout its long dark hair, coarse as tow, were set bunches of white hairs, some of them so long that, when they floated out to their full extent, the width of that marvelous tail exceeded its length. At the very tip was a white tuft which could be erected. Wise wild folk, when they saw that tuft standing straight up, removed themselves elsewhere with exceeding rapidity. As for the unwise — they wished they had. Between the small eyes, which were set nearer to the pointed nose than to the broad ears, was a fine white stripe running back to a white ruff at the back of the neck. From this a wide white stripe extended across the shoulders, and branched down either flank.

As he ambled homewards in the sunlight, the skunk had such an air of innocence and helplessness,

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that a young fox, coming down the hillside after a night of unsuccessful hunting, decided that the decorative stranger must be some unusual kind of rabbit, and dashed forward to catch it with a quick sidelong snap of his narrow jaws. Unfortunately for him, the skunk snapped first. His ancestors had learned the secret of the gas-attack a million years before the Boche. As the fox rushed upon him, the skunk twisted its tail to one side bringing into action two glands near the base of its tail which secrete a clear golden fluid filled with tiny floating bubbles of a devastating gas, against which neither man nor beast can stand. Moreover, the skunk's accurate breech-loading and repeating weapon has one other improvement not as yet found in any human-made artillery. Each gland, beside the hole for long-range purposes, is pierced with a circle of smaller holes, through which the deadly gas can be sprayed in a cloud for work at close quarters.

Just as the jaws of the fox were opened to seize him, the skunk compressed the mat of powerful muscles that encircled the two conical scent-glands. From the circle of tiny openings a cloud of choking, blinding, corrosive gas poured full into the fox's astonished face. To human nostrils the very odor of the gas is appalling. A mixture of garlic, sewer-gas, sulphur-matches, musk, and a number of other indescribable smells only faintly defines it. A fox, however, is by no means squeamish about smells. Many odors which are revolting and unbearable to human nostrils arouse only pleasurable sensations in

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a fox. What sent him rolling backwards over and over, and stiffened and contracted his throat-muscles in spasms, was the choking acrid gas itself. It strangled him just as the fumes of chlorine or ammonia gas will choke a man. Only one thought remained in that fox's mind. Air, air, fresh untainted air, preferably miles away. He departed to find it, at an initial velocity of something less than a mile a minute, while his adversary lowered his plumed tail and regarded him forgivingly. Then, with mincing, deliberate steps, the skunk started leisurely back to his home on the hillside, which had once been the property of a grizzled old woodchuck.

On a day, however, the woodchuck had come back to his burrow, only to find that he had been dispossessed. The woodchuck is a surly and dogged fighter, and always fully able and disposed to protect his rights. Yet it took but a single sniff to make this one abandon his lands, tenements, and hereditaments, with all easements of ingress, egress, and regress. From thenceforth, to the skunk belonged the whole complicated system of tunnels and galleries. To him belonged the two public entrances and a third concealed from sight in a little thicket. To him came the cozy nest, with its three exits in the centre of a maze of passages, the storehouses, the sand-piles, and the sun-warmed slope where the former owner had been accustomed to take his ease. From that day forward he occupied them all in undisturbed possession.

After the rout of the fox, the skunk slept until

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late in the afternoon, and an hour before sunset was out again. Here and there, through the bushes and among the trees, he tacked and zigzagged in an apparently absent-minded way. Yet nothing that he could eat escaped those small deep-set eyes or that long pointed nose. Near the edge of the woods he passed under a sugar-maple tree. On a lower limb sat Chickaree, the irritable, explosive red squirrel, nibbling away at a long cylindrical object which he held tightly clasped in his forepaws. As the skunk passed underneath, the squirrel stopped to scold at him on general principles, and became so emphatic in his remarks that he lost his hold of what he had been eating, and it fell directly in front of the plodding skunk. It was only an icicle, but after one sniff the skunk proceeded to crunch it down eagerly while the red squirrel raved overhead. The day before, the squirrel had nibbled a hole in the bark of one of the maple limbs, to taste the sweet sap which the thaw had started flowing; and during the night the running sap had frozen into a long sweet icicle, the candy of the wild folk, which heretofore only the squirrels had enjoyed.

The last bit of frozen sweetness swallowed, the skunk ambled up the hillside. Suddenly he stopped, and sniffed at a little ridge in the snow which hardly showed upon the surface. Hardly had he poked his pointed nose into the hummock, before it burst like a bomb, and out from the snow started a magnificent cock grouse. During the storm he had plunged into the drift for shelter, and the warmth of his body had

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melted a snug little room for him under the snow. There, safe and warm, he had feasted on the store of rich, spicy seeds that he found on the sweet fern under the snow, and for long days and nights had been safe from cold and hunger. The thaw, however, had thinned his coverlet so that the fine nose of the skunk had scented him through the white crystals.

As the partridge broke from the snow, his magnificent, iridescent, black-green ruff stood out a full three inches around his neck, and his strong wings began the whirring flight of his kind. The skunk shed his slowness like a mask and, with the lightning-like pounce of the weasel family, caught the escaping bird just back of the ruff and snapped his neck asunder. There was a tremendous fluttering and beating of brown mottled feathers against the white snow, and a minute later he was feeding full on the most delicious meat in the world.

Before he had finished, there came an interruption. Down from the top of the hill trotted another skunk, an oldtimer whose range marched next to that of the first. As the newcomer caught sight of the dead partridge, he hurried down to join in the feast. The other skunk stopped eating at the sight of this unbidden guest, and made a kind of chirring, complaining noise, with an occasional low growl. According to skunk-standards that was a tremendous exhibition of rage, but the second skunk came on unmoved. Under the Skunk Geneva Convention, the use of aerial bombs or any form of gas-attack against

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skunk-kind is barred. In a battle between skunk and skunk the fighters must depend upon tooth and claw. Accordingly, when the stranger sniffed approvingly at the half-eaten bird, he was promptly nipped by the owner of the same, just back of the forepaw. He, in turn, secured a grip on the first skunk's neck, and in a moment the atmosphere was full of flying snow and whirling fur. The teeth of each fighter were so fine and their fur so thick, that neither one could do much damage to the other; but they fought and rolled and chirred and growled, until they looked like a great black-and-white pinwheel.

The contest caught the eyes of an old red fox, who was loping around a ten-mile circle in search of any little unconsidered trifle that might come his way. He was a seasoned old veteran and, unlike the novice of the day before, was well acquainted with skunk-ways. Not for any prize that the country round about held would he have attacked either one of that battling pair. His was a purely sporting interest in the fight, until he happened to catch a glimpse of the partridge half-covered by the loose snow. On the instant, he nobly resolved to play the peacemaker and remove the cause of all the trouble. Step by step, he stole up closer to the fighters, all set to turn and run for his life if either one of them saw him. At last he was poised and taut on his tiptoes not six feet from the prize. As an extra whirl of the contestants carried them to the farthest circumference of the circle of which the partridge was the

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centre, the fox started like a sprinter from his marks, and reached the grouse in one desperate bound.

Just at that instant a disengaged eye of the first of the skunks came to the surface, in time to see his grouse departing toward the horizon, slung over the shoulder of the fox, nearly as fast as if it had gone under its own wing-power. Instantly the skunk released his hold. His opponent did the same, and the two scrambled to their feet and for a long moment stood sombrely watching the vanishing partridge. Then, without a sound, they turned their backs on each other and trotted away in opposite directions.

A week later the thaw was over, and all that hill-country was once more in the grip of winter. When the temperature went down toward the zero-mark, the skunk went back to bed. Rolled up in a round ball of fur, with his warm tail wrapped about him like a fleecy coverlet, he slept out the cold in the mid-most chamber of his den on a bed of soft, dry grass. At the first sign of spring he was out again, the latest to bed and the earliest to rise of all the Sleepers.

At last the green banners of spring were planted on all the hills. Underneath the dry leaves, close to the ground, the fragrant pink-and-white blossoms of the trailing arbutus showed here and there; while deeper in the woods leathery trefoil leaves, green above and dark violet beneath, vainly tried to hide the blue-and-white-porcelain petals of the hepatica. In bare spots the crowded tiny white blossoms of the saxifrage showed in the withered grass, and the blood-

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root, with its golden heart and snowy, short-lived petals, and gnarled root which drips blood when broken. A little later the hillsides were blue with violets, and yellow with adder's-tongue with its drooping blossoms and spotted fawn-colored leaves. Then came days of feasting, which made up for the long lean weeks that had gone before. There were droning, blundering June-bugs, crickets, grubs, grasshoppers, field-mice, snakes, strawberries, and so many other delicacies that the skunk's walk was fast becoming a waddle.

It was on one of those late spring days that the Artist and the Skunk had their first and last meeting. Said artist was none other than Reginald De Haven, whose water-colors were world-famous. Reginald had a rosy face, and wore velvet knickerbockers and large chubby legs, and made the people of Cornwall suspect his sanity by frequently telescoping his hands to look at color-values. This spring he was boarding with old Mark Hurlbutt, over on Cream Hill. On the day of the meeting, he had been sketching down by Cream Pond and had taken a wood-road home. Where it entered one of Mark's upper pastures, he saw a strange black-and-white animal moving leisurely toward him, and stood still lest he frighten it away. He might have spared his fears. The stranger moved toward him, silent, imperturbable, and with an assured air. As it came nearer, the artist was impressed with its color-scheme. The snowy stripe down the pointed black nose, the mass of white back of the black head,

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and, above all, the resplendent, waving pompon of a tail, made it a spectacular study in blacks and whites.

With tiny mincing steps the little animal came straight on toward him. It seemed so tame and unconcerned, that De Haven planned to catch it and carry it back to the farm wrapped up in his coat. As he took a step forward, the stranger seemed for the first time to notice him. It stopped and stamped with its forepaws, in what seemed to the artist a playful and attractive manner. This, if he had but known it, was signal number one of the prescribed three which a well-bred skunk always gives, if there be time, even to his bitterest enemies.

As De Haven moved toward the animal, he was again interested to see the latter hoist aloft the gorgeous black-and-white banner of its clan. Rushing on to his ruin, he went unregardingly past this second danger-signal. By this time, he was within six feet of the skunk, which had now come to a full stop and was watching him intently out of its deep-set eyes. As he approached still nearer, he noticed that the white tip of the tail, which heretofore had hung dangling, suddenly stiffened and waved erect. "Like a flag of truce," he observed whimsically to himself. Never was there a more dreadful misapprehension. That raising of the white tail-tip is the skunk's ultimate warning. After that, remains nothing but war and carnage and chaos.

If even then the artist had but stood stony still,

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there might have been room for repentance, for the skunk is long-suffering and loath to go into action. No country-bred guardian angel came to De Haven's rescue. Stepping quickly forward, he stooped to seize the motionless animal. Even as he leaned forward, his fate overtook him. Swinging his plumed tail to one side, the skunk bent its back at the shoulders, and brought its secondary batteries into action. A puff of what seemed like vapor shot toward the unfortunate artist, and a second later he had an experience in atmospheric values which had never come into his sheltered life before. From the crown of his velour hat with the little plume at the side, down to his suede shoes, he was Maranatha and Anathema to the whole world, including himself. Coughing, sneezing, gasping, strangling, racked by nausea and wheezing for breath, his was the motto of the Restless Club: "Anywhere but here." His last sight of the animal which had so influenced his life showed it demurely moving along the path from which it had never once swerved.

The wind was blowing toward the farmhouse, and although it was half a mile away, old Mark Hurlbutt soon had advance reports of the battle.

"A skunk b'gosh!" he remarked to himself, stopping on his way to the barn; "and an able-bodied one, too," he continued, sniffing the breeze.

A minute later he saw someone running toward him, and recognized his boarder. Even as he saw him, a certain aura which hung about the approaching figure made plain to Mark what had happened.

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"Hey! stop right where you be!" shouted the old man. "Another step an' I'll shoot," he went on, aiming the shovel which he had in his hand directly at the distressed artist's head, and trying not to breathe.

De Haven halted in his tracks.

"But — but — I require assistance," he pleaded.

"You sure do," agreed his landlord; "somethin' tells me so. Hustle over back of the smoke-house and get your clothes off an' I'll join you in a minute."

Mark hurried into the house, and was out again almost immediately with a large bottle of benzine, a wagon-sponge, a calico shirt, and a pair of overalls. As he came around the corner, the sight of the artist posing all pink and white against the smoke-house, with a pile of discarded clothes at his feet, was too much for the old man, and he cackled like a hen.

"Darned if you don't look like one of them fauns you 're all the time paintin', " he gasped.

"Shut up!" snapped the artist. "You fix me up right away, or I'll put these clothes on again and walk through every room in your house."

This threat brought immediate action, and a few moments later an expensive and artistic suit of clothes reposed in a lonely grave back of Mark's smoke-house, where they remain even to this day. Thereafter the artist, scrubbed with benzine until he smelt like a garage, left Cornwall forever. He was wearing a mackintosh of his own. Everything else belonged to Mark.

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"It 's lucky for you that he went when he did," said old Hen Root the next evening, when the story was told at Silas Dean's store at the Centre. "You 're gettin' on, Mark," he continued solemnly. "If he 'd a' stayed you might have got some kind of a stroke or other from over-laughin' yourself. I didn't dare to do any work for nigh a week after I first saw him telescopin' round in them velvet short pants."

"That 's right," agreed Silas Dean heartily; "an' you ain't done any since — nor before," he concluded, carefully closing the cracker-barrel next to Hen.

It was, perhaps, the meeting with an eminent artist that aroused a new ambition in the skunk's mind. At any rate, from that day he began to haunt the farmyard. The first news that Mark had of his presence was when a motherly old hen, who had been sitting contentedly on twelve eggs for nearly a week, wandered around and around her empty nest clucking disconsolately. During the night some sly thief had slipped egg after egg out from under her brooding wings, so deftly that she never even clucked a protest. In the morning there were left only scattered egg-shells and a tell-tale track in the dust.

"Blamed old rascal," roared Mark. "First he loses me a good boarder an' now he 's ate up a full clutch of pedigree white Wyandotte eggs. I'm goin' to shoot that skunk on sight."

Mark was mistaken. Early the next morning he

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opened the spring-house to set in a pail of milk. There, right beside the magnificent spring which boiled and bubbled in the centre of the cement floor, a black-and-white stranger was contentedly drinking from a pan of milk that had been placed there to cool. As Mark opened the door, the skunk looked at him calmly, and then quietly raised the banner which had waved over many a bloodless victory. Whereupon the owner of the spring-house backed away, and waited until his visitor had finished his drink and disappeared in a patch of bushes back of the milk-house.

"What about all that talk of shootin' that skunk at sight?" queried Jonas, the hired man, that evening at supper.

"The trouble was, Jonas," returned Mark confidentially, "he got the drop on me. If I 'd shot I 'd of lost one spring, six gallons of milk, an' a suit of clothes."

"You men are a lot of cowards," scolded his wife. "I 'd of found some way to stop that skunk a-drinkin' up a whole pan of good milk right in front of my eyes. He 'd not bluff me."

"Mirandy," said Mark solemnly, "you take it from me that skunk ain't no bluffer. If you don't believe it, telegraph Mr. De Haven."

In spite of her threat, it was Miranda herself who afterwards insisted that the skunk should continue to live on the farm without fear or reproach. Late one afternoon she had been coming down Pond Hill on a search for a new-born calf

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which, as usual, had been hidden by its mother somewhere in the thick woods. The path was sunken deep between banks covered with the yellow blossoms of the hardhack. At one spot, where the way widened into a rude road, a crooked green stem stretched out across the pathway, and from it swayed a great rose-red flower like some exquisite carved shell. It was the moccasin flower, the most beautiful of our early orchids. Miranda bent down to pick it with a little gasp of delight.

Suddenly, from just beyond, came a warning hiss, and in front of her reared the bloated swollen body of a fearsome snake. The reptile's head was flattened out until it was half as wide as her hand, and it swelled and hissed rhythmically like the exhaust of a steam-pipe, and repeatedly struck out in her direction, the very embodiment of blind, venomous rage. Half paralyzed with fear, Miranda moved backward and began to wonder what she would do. Night was coming on, and if she went back over the hill, it would be dark before she could reach home. As for going around, no power on earth would have persuaded her to step into the thick bushes on either side of the path, convinced as she was that they must be swarming with snakes.

At this psychological moment, ambling unconcernedly up the path, came the same black-and-white beast about which she had spoken so bitterly the day before. As it caught sight of the snake coiling and rearing and hissing, the skunk's gait quickened, and it approached the threatening figure with cheer-

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ful alacrity. The snake puffed and hissed and struck, but the skunk never even hesitated. Holding the reptile down with its slim paws it nibbled off the threatening head, neatly skinned the squirming body, and before Mrs. Hurlbutt's delighted eyes ate it up. Then, without apparently noticing her at all, it went on up the hill until lost to sight among the hardhacks.

It would have been impossible to convince Miranda that the snake was nothing but a harmless puff-adder, and that, in spite of its bluffing ways, it had no fangs and never was known to bite. From that day on the skunk was envisaged in her mind as the guardian angel of the farm, and the edict went out that on no account was it to be molested. Not even when most of the bees from one of Mark's cherished swarms disappeared into its leather-lined interior, would Miranda permit any adverse action.

"Some skunk that!" jeered Mark. "You let it get away with bees an' boarders an' milk an' eggs, an' never say a word. I wisht you cared as much for your husband."

"I might, if he was as brave — an' good-looking," murmured Miranda.

It was the sweet influences of the month of June which settled the dispute. Jonas had been down in the sap-works, where the vast sugar-maples grew below the milk-house meadow. As he came back up the slope, the great golden moon of June was showing its rim over Pond Hill. Ahead of him he saw a familiar black-and-white shape moving

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toward the woods. Even as he watched, a procession came down to meet him. At its head marched another full-grown skunk, while back of her was a long winding procession of little skunks. One, two, three, four, five, six — Jonas counted them up to ten, and the last one of all was jet-black except for a tiny stripe of white on its muzzle. There was a long pause as the lone skunk met the band. Then suddenly he was at the head of it, and the long procession trailed contentedly after him. Separated from him by a winter and a spring, Mrs. Skunk had rejoined her mate, bringing her sheaves with her. Away from the tame folk to return no more, the wild folk moved on and on into the heart of the summer woods.

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IV

HIGH SKY

"CLANG! Clang! Clang!" — the sound drifted down from mid-sky, as if the ice-cold gates of winter were opening. A gaggle of Canada geese, wearing white bibs below their black heads and necks, came beating down the wind, shouting to earth as they flew. Below them, although it was still fall, the tan-colored marsh showed ash-gray stretches of new ice, with here and there blue patches of snow. Suddenly, faint and far sounded other notes, as of a distant horn, and a company of misty-white trumpeter swans swept along the sky, gleaming like silver in the sun. Down from the Arctic tundras they had come, where during the short summer their great nests had stood like watchtowers above the level sphagnum bogs; for the trumpeter swan, like the eagle, scorns to hide its nest and fears no foe of earth or air.

As their trumpet notes pealed across the marsh, they were answered everywhere by the confused cries and calls of innumerable waterfowl; for when the swan starts south, it is no time for lesser breeds to linger. Wisps of snipe and badlings of duck sprang into the air. The canvasback ducks, with their dark red heads and necks, grunted as they flew; the wings of the golden-eye whistled, the scaup purred, the

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black ducks, and the mallards with emerald-green heads, quacked, the pintails whimpered — the air was full of duck-notes. As they swept southward, the different families took their places according to their speed. Well up in the van were the canvasbacks, who can travel at the rate of one hundred and sixty feet per second. Next came the pintails, and the wood-ducks, whose drakes have wings of velvet-black, purple, and white. The mallards and the black ducks brought up the rear; while far behind a cloud of blue-winged teal whizzed down the sky, the lustrous light blue of their wings glinting like polished steel in the sunlight. Flying in perfect unison, the distance between them and the main flock rapidly lessened; for the blue-winged teal, when it settles down to fly, can tick off two miles a minute. A few yards back of their close cloud followed a single green-winged teal, a tiny drake with a chestnut-brown head brightly striped with green, who wore an emerald patch on either wing.

In a moment the blue-wings had passed the quacking mallards and black ducks as if they had been anchored in the sky. The whistlers and pintails were overtaken next, and then, more slowly, the little flock, flying in perfect form, began to cut down the lead of the canvasbacks in front. Little by little, the tiny teal edged up, in complete silence, to the whizzing, grunting leaders, until at last they were flying right abreast of them. At first slowly, and then more and more rapidly, they drew away, until a clear space of sky showed between the two flocks,

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including the green-winged follower. Then, for the first time, the blue-wings spoke, voicing their victory in soft, lisping notes, which were echoed by a mellow whistle from the green-wing.

The sound of his own voice seemed suddenly to rèmind the latter that he was one of the speed-kings of the sky. An inch shorter than his blue-winged brother, the green-winged teal is yet a hardier and a swifter bird. Unhampered by any flock-formation, the wing-beats of this lone flyer increased until he shot forward like a projectile. In a moment he was up to the leaders, then above them; and then, with a tremendous burst of speed, he passed and went slashing down the sky alone. Farther and farther in front flashed the little green-striped head, and more and more faintly his short whistles came back to the flock behind.

Perhaps it was his call, or it might have been the green gleam of his speeding head, that caught the attention of a sky-pirate hovering in a reach of sky far above. Like other pirates, this one wore a curling black moustache in the form of a black stripe around its beak which, with the long, rakish wings and hooked, toothed beak, marked it as the duck-hawk, one of the fiercest and swiftest of the falcons. As the hawk caught sight of the speeding little teal, his telescopic eyes gleamed like fire, and curving down through the sky, in a moment he was in its wake. Every feather of the little drake's taut and tense body showed his speed, as he traveled at a two-mile-a-minute clip.

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Not so with the lithe falcon who pursued him. The movements of his long, narrow wings and arrowy body were so effortless that it seemed impossible that he could overtake the other. Yet every wing-beat brought him nearer and nearer, in a flight so swift and silent that not until the shadow of death fell upon the teal did the latter even know that he was being pursued. Then, indeed, he squawked in mortal terror, and tried desperately to increase a speed which already seemed impossible. Yet ever the shadow hung over him like a black shroud, and then, in a flash, the little green-wing's fate overtook him. Almost too quickly for eye to follow, the duck-hawk delivered the terrible slash with which falcons kill their prey, and in an instant the teal changed from a live, vibrant, arrow-swift bird to a limp mass of fluttering feathers, which dropped like a plummet through the air. With a rush, the duck-hawk swung down after his dead quarry, and catching it in his claws, swooped down to earth to feast full at his leisure.

Far, far above the lower reaches of the sky, where the cloud of waterfowl were flying, above rain and storm and snow, was a solitude entered by only a few of the sky-pilgrims. There, three miles high, were naked space and a curved sky that shone like a great blue sun. In the north a cluster of black dots showed against the blue. Swiftly they grew in size, until at last, under a sun far brighter than the one known to the earthbound, there flashed through the glittering air a flock of golden plover. They were still wearing their summer suits, with black breasts and

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sides, while every brown-black feather on back and crown was widely margined with pure gold. Before they reached Patagonia the black would be changed for gray; for the Arctic summer of the golden plover is so short that he must moult, and even do his courting, on the wing.

This company had nested up among the everlasting snows, and the mileage of their flight was to be measured by thousands instead of hundreds. To-day they were on their first lap of fifteen hundred miles to the shores of Nova Scotia. There they would rest before taking the Water Route which only kings of the air can follow. Straight across the storm-swept Atlantic and the treacherous Gulf of Mexico, two thousand four hundred miles, they would fly, on their way to their next stop on the pampas of the Argentine. Fainter-hearted flyers chose the circuitous Island Passage, across Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Antilles, to the northern shore of South America. The chuck-will's-widow of the Gulf States, cuckoos from New England, gray-checked thrushes from Quebec, bank-swallows from Labrador, black-poll warblers from Alaska, and hosts and myriads of bobolinks from everywhere took the Bobolink Route from Florida to Cuba, and the seven hundred miles across the Gulf to South America.

Only a few of the highest-powered water-birds shared the Water Route with the plover. When this flock started, they had circled and wheeled and swooped in the wonderful evolutions of their kind,

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but had finally swung into their journey-gait — and when a plover settles down to straight flying, it would seem to be safe from anything slower than a bullet.

Far above the flock floated what seemed a fleck of white cloud blown up from the lower levels. As it drifted swiftly down toward the speeding plover, it grew into a great bird sparsely mottled with pearl-gray, whose pointed wings had a spread of nearly five feet. Driven down from Greenland by cold and famine, a white gyrfalcon was haunting these solitudes like some grim ghost of the upper sky. His fierce eyes were of a glittering black, as was the tip of his blue hooked beak.

As the plover whizzed southward on their way to Summer, some shadow of the coming of the falcon must have fallen upon them; for suddenly the whole flock broke and scattered through the sky, like a dropped handful of beads, each bird twisting and doubling through the air, yet still shooting ever southward at a speed which few other flyers could have equaled. Unluckily for the plover, the gyrfalcon is perhaps the fastest bird that flies, and moreover it has all of that mysterious gift of the falcon family of following automatically every double and twist and turn of any bird which it elects to pursue. This one chose his victim, and in a flash was following it through the sky. Here and there, back and forth, up and down, in dizzy circles and bewildering curves, the great hawk sped after the largest of the plover. As if driven in some invisible tandem, the white form of the falcon kept an exact distance from the plover,

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until at last the latter gave up circling and doubling for a stretch of straight flight. In an instant, the flashing white wings of the falcon were above it; there was the same arrowy pounce with which the lesser falcon had struck down the teal; and, a moment later, the gyrfalcon had caught the falling body, and was volplaning down to earth with the dead plover in its claws.

For a time after this tragedy the sky seemed empty, as the scattered plover passed out of sight, to come together as a flock many miles beyond. Then a multitude of tiny black specks showed for an instant in the blue. They seemed almost like motes in the sunlight, save that, instead of dancing up and down, they shot forward with an almost inconceivable swiftness. It was as if a stream of bullets had suddenly become visible. Immeasurably faster than any bird of even twice its size, a flock of ruby-throated humming-birds, the smallest birds in the world, sped unfalteringly toward the sunland of the South. Their buzzing flight had a dipping, rolling motion, as they disappeared in the distance on their way to the Gulf of Mexico, whose seven hundred miles of treacherous water they would cover without a rest.

As the setting sun approached the rim of the world, the lower clouds changed from banks of snow into masses of fuming gold, splashed and blotched with an intolerable crimson. Again the sky was full of birds. Those last of the day-flyers were the swallow-folk. White-bellied tree swallows; barn swal-

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lows, with long forked tails; cliff swallows, with cream-white foreheads; bank and rough-winged swallows, with brown backs — the air was full of their whirling, curving flight. With them went their big brothers, the purple martins, and the night hawks, with their white-barred wings, which at times, as they whirled downward, made a hollow twanging noise. With the flock, too, were the swifts, who sleep and nest in chimneys, and whose winter home no man yet has discovered.

As the turquoise of the curved sky deepened into sapphire, a shadowy figure came toward the circling, flashing throng of swifts and swallows. The newcomer's great bare wings seemed made of sections of brown parchment jointed together unlike those of any bird. Nor did any bird ever wear soft brown fur frosted with silver, nor have wide flappy ears and a hobgoblin face. Miles above the ground this earth-born mammal was beating the birds in their own element. None of the swallows showed any alarm as the stranger overtook them, for they recognized him as the hoary bat, the largest of North American bats, who migrates with the swallows and, like them, feeds only on insects.

As the sun sank lower, the great company of the bird-folk swooped down toward the earth, for swallows, swifts, and martins are all day-flyers. Not so with the bat. In the fading light, he flew steadily southward alone — but not for long. Up from earth came again the great gyrfalcon, his fierce hunger unsatisfied with the few mouthfuls torn from the

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plover's plump breast. As his fierce eyes caught sight of the flitting bat, his wings flashed through the air with the same speed that had overtaken the plover. No bird that flies could have kept ahead of the rush of the great hawk through the air.

A mammal, however, is farther along in the scale of life than a bird, and more efficient, even as a flyer. As the pricked-up ears of the bat caught the swish of the falcon's wings, the beats of its own skin-covered pair increased, and the bird suddenly ceased to gain. Disdaining to double or zigzag, the great bat flew the straightaway race which the falcon loves, and which would have meant quick death to any bird who tried it. Skin, however, makes a better flying surface than feathers, and slowly but unmistakably the bat began to draw away from its pursuer. The gyrfalcon is the speed-king among birds, but the hoary bat is faster still. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed before the hawk realized that he was being outflown. Increase his speed as he would, the bat, in an effortless nonchalant manner, moved farther away. When only a streak of silver sky, with a shoal of little violet clouds, was left of the daylight the gyrfalcon gave up the chase. As he swooped down to earth like a white meteor, the brown figure of the bat disappeared in the violet twilight, beating, beating his way south.

As the sky darkened to a peacock-blue, and a faint amber band in the west tried to bar the dark, suddenly the star-shine was full of soft pipings and chirpings. The night-flyers had begun their journey,

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and were calling back and forth heartening each other as they flew through the long dark hours. Against the golden disc of the rising moon a continuous procession of tiny black figures showed the whole sky to be full of these pilgrims from the north. The " chink, chink " of the bobolinks dropped through the stillness like silver coins; and from higher up came the " tsip, tsip, tsip " of the black-poll warblers, all the way from the Magdalen Islands. With them were a score or so of others of the great warbler family. Black-throated blues, Cape Mays, redstarts, golden-wings, yellow warblers, black-throated greens, magnolias, myrtles, and tiny parulas — myriads of this many-colored family were traveling together through the sky. With them went the vireos, the orioles, the tanagers, and four different kinds of thrushes, with a dozen or so other varieties of birds following.

Most of them had put on their traveling clothes for the long journey. The tanagers had laid aside their crimson and black, and wore yellowish-green suits. The indigo bird had lost his vivid blue, the rose stain of the rose-breasted grosbeak was gone, along with the white cheeks of the black-poll warbler and the black throat of the black-throated green, while the bobolinks wore sober coats of olive-buff streaked with black, in place of their cream-white and velvet black.

Once during the night, as the army crossed an Atlantic cape, a lighthouse flashed its fatal eye at them. Immediately the ranks of the flyers broke,

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and in confused groups they circled around and around the witch-fire which no bird may pass. For hours they flew in dizzying circles, until, weary and bewildered, some of the weaker ones began to sink toward the dark water. Fortunately for them, at midnight the color of the light changed from white to red. Instantly the prisoners were freed from the spell which only the white light lays upon them, and in a minute the air was filled with glad flight-calls, as the released ranks hurried on and away through the dark.

All night long they flew steadily, and turned earthward only at sunrise. As the weary flyers sought the trees and fields for rest and food, overhead, against a crimson and gold dawn, passed the long-distance champion of the skies — the Arctic tern, with its snow-white breast, black head, curved wings, and forked tail. Nesting as far north as it can find land, only seven and a half degrees from the Pole, it flies eleven thousand miles to the Antarctic, and, ranging from pole to pole, sees more daylight than any other creature. For eight months of its year it never knows night, and during the other four has more daylight than dark. Scorner of all lands, tireless, unresting, this dweller in the loneliest places of earth flashed white across the dawn-sky — and was gone.

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V

THE LITTLE PEOPLE

THE swamp-maples showed rose-red and gold-green in the warm sunlight, and the woods were etched lavender-brown against a heliotrope sky. The bluebird, with the sky-color on his back and the red-brown of earth at his breast, called, "Far-away! far-away! far-away!" in his soft sweet contralto. From a wet meadow a company of rusty blackbirds, with short tails and white eyes, sang together like a flock of creaking wheelbarrows, with single split notes sounding constantly above the squealing chorus. Beyond the meadow was a little pool, where the air was vibrant with the music of the frogs. The hylas sang like a chest of whistles so shrill that the air quivered with their song. At intervals, a single clear flute-note rose above the chorus, the love-call of the little red salamander; while the drawling mutter of cricket-frogs, the trilled call of the wood-frogs, and the soft croon of the toad added delicate harmonies. Near-by a song-sparrow sang wheezingly from a greening willow tree, but its note sounded flat compared with the shrill, high sweetness of the batrachian chorus.

Near the top of Prindle Hill was a dry warm slope, with stretches of underbrush, pasture, and ledges of rock rising to the patch of woods which

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crowned the crest of the hill. Beyond was a tiny lake. Everywhere along the sunny slope were small round holes bored through the tough turf. As the sun rose higher and higher, little waves of heat penetrated deep below the grass-roots.

Suddenly, from out of one of the holes, a little pointed nose was thrust, and a second later the first chipmunk of the year darted above ground from the burrow where he had slept out the long winter. His dark pepper-and-salt colored back had a black-brown stripe down the centre and four others in pairs along either side, separated by strips of cream-white. His cheeks, flanks, feet, and the underside of his black fringed tail were of a light fawn-color, and he wore a silky white waistcoat. Erecting his white-tipped tail, he sat up on his haunches and tipping back his head, began to sing the spring song which every chipmunk must sing when he first comes above ground at the dawn of the year. "Chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck," he chirped loudly, at the rate of two chirps per second.

At the very first note sharp noses and bright black eyes appeared at every hole, and in a second a score or more other singers had whisked out and joined in the spring chorus, each one bent on proving that his notes were the loudest and clearest of any on the hill. One of the last to begin was a half-grown chipmunk, who had been crowded out of the family burrow by new arrivals the autumn before. Fortunately for him, however, the next burrow was occupied by a chipmunk of an inquiring disposition. Said dis-

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position caused him to wait to investigate the habits of a passing red fox. Thereafter his burrow was to let, and was immediately taken possession of by the young chipmunk aforesaid.

This new tenant came out timidly, even when he felt the thrill of spring. Once above ground, however, he simply had to sing. At his very first note, he sensed a difference between his voice and those of all the others. Whereas they sang " Chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck," he sang "Chippy, chippy, chippy." To his delighted ear his own higher notes were far superior to those of his companions, and he shrilled away, ecstatically, with half-closed eyes. Ten minutes went happily by. Then a singer on the outskirts caught sight of a marsh-hawk quartering the hillside, and gave the alarm-squeal as he dove into his hole. The song broke in the middle, as every singer whisked underground and the annual spring song was over. Thereafter the customary caution of a chipmunk-colony was resumed.

At first, Chippy ventured but seldom outside of his new burrow. Far in under the turf was the store-house, filled by its first owner full of hazel-nuts, cherry-pits, wild buckwheat, buttercup seeds, maple-keys, and other chipmunk staples, all carefully cleaned, dried, and stored. On these he lived largely during the first few weeks of spring. Then came a day when he entered his front door with a flying leap, only to find a burly and determined stranger blocking his way. A bustling and lusty bachelor from another colony had spied the burrow from the stone

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wall, the broad highway of all chipmunks, and had decided to make it his own by right of conquest.

In vain Chippy fought for his home, at first desperately and then despairingly. The other chipmunk had the advantage of weight, experience, and position, and Chippy was forced slowly out into the wide world. Squealing and chirping with rage, with his soft fur fluffed up all over his sleek body, he came out into the sunlight. He saw nothing, heard nothing, scented nothing, hostile. Yet, obeying the little alarm-bell that rings in every chipmunk's brain, he dashed desperately for the shelter of the stone wall. It was well for him that he did. As he crossed the wide stretch of turf like a tawny streak, there was a whirl of wing-beats, the flash of a gray-brown body balanced by a narrow black-barred tail, and the shadow of death fell upon him even as he neared his refuge. With a frightened squeal, Chippy put every atom of the force which pulsed through his little vibrant body into one last spring. Even as he disappeared headlong into a chink between two large stones, a set of keen claws clamped vainly through the long hairs of his vanishing tail, as a sharp-shinned hawk somersaulted with a backward sweep of its wings, to avoid dashing itself against the wall. For a moment it vibrated in the air with cruel, crooked beak half-open, searching the wall with unflinching golden eyes, and then skimmed sullenly away.

In a minute a pointed nose was poked out from the stones and carefully winnowed the air. Satisfied

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that the coast was clear, Chippy at last scurried up to the top of the wall, where he could see on all sides, with a wide cranny conveniently near; for a chipmunk who desires to live out all his days must never be more than two jumps from a hole. Sitting up on the stone, he produced from one of the pockets which he wore in either cheek a large hickory nut, which had been pouched there all through his fight and flight. Holding it firmly in both his little three-fingered, double-thumbed forepaws, he nibbled an alternate hole in either side, through which he extracted every last fragment of the rich, brown kernel within. While he ate, there was never a second during which his sharp black eyes were not scanning every inch of the circumference of which his stone was the centre. There was not an instant that his sharp ears were not pricked up to catch the slightest sound, and his keen nostrils to sniff the faintest scent, that would indicate the approach of death in any of the many forms in which it comes to chipmunks.

His meal finished, Chippy turned his instantaneous mind to the next most important item of life. On his list of necessities, *Home* stared at him in capitals just under the item *Food*. A stone wall makes a good lodging-house but a poor home, for it has too many doors. Wherefore Chippy scampered along the top of the wall, his tail erect like a plume, scanning the hillside as he ran for a good building-site. At last, he came to a dry bank covered with short twisted ringlets of tough grass, which sloped up from the stone wall and ended in a clump of sweet fern.

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With a flying leap, he struck the middle of the bank, and with another bound was safe in the depths of the sweet fern.

From there he commenced to dig. No one has ever yet found a fleck or flake of loose earth near the entrance to a chipmunk home. This is because he always starts digging at the other end. Working like a little steam-shovel, within a few days Chippy had dug a series of intersecting tunnels, of which the main one ended between two stones at the base of the wall. Far down among the roots of a rotting stump, he made a warm nest of leaves and grass. From this sleeping-room a twisted passage led to a rounded storeroom on the other side of the stump. No less than three emergency entrances and exits were made within a ten-foot circle; and beside the bedroom and storeroom he dug a kitchen midden, where all refuse and garbage could be deposited and covered with earth, in accordance with the custom of all properly brought-up chipmunks. When at last every grain of earth had been carried out through the first hole among the overshadowing ferns, he sealed it up from the outside, and covered the packed earth with leaves. Then he took a day off. Climbing to the top of the wall, he perched himself where a single bound would take him to the main entrance of his new home, and with his little nose pointed skyward told the world, at the rate of one hundred and thirty chirps per minute, what a wonderful home was his. Thereafter began an unending seach for food. On the far side of the slope he found a thicket of hazel

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bushes, which had been overlooked by the rest of the colony. Thence he would return to his burrow, looking as if he had a bad attack of mumps. Really it was only nuts. Twelve hazel-nuts, or four acorns, were Chippy's tonnage.

By the time the flood-tide of summer had set in, Chippy had reached the high watermark of his youth. Larger, stronger, and swifter than any of the younger members of the colony, he soon began to rival the elders of the community in wisdom. Then suddenly there came to the Little People of the Woods, a wandering demon of blood and carnage. One sunny afternoon, while every chipmunk on that hillside was abroad, playing, feasting, hoarding, singing, there flashed in among them a reddish animal, with a long black-tipped tail, white chin and cheeks, and a fierce pointed head. Sniffing here and there like a trailing hound, it darted down upon the little colony.

It was the long-tailed, or great, weasel, whose movements are so swift as to baffle even the quickest eye. Caught too far from their burrows, the lives of four chipmunks went out like the puff of a candle. Then the high alarm-squeal ran up and down the hillside, and every chipmunk within hearing dived underground where they were all safe; for the great weasel is just one size too large to enter a chipmunk's burrow. Hither and there the weasel wound its way, like some fierce swift snake. With its flaming eyes, white cheeks dabbled red with blood, and flat triangular head swaying from side to side on a long

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neck, it looked the very personification of sudden death.

Farthest from home of all the others, Chippy, the swift and wise, faced the death which had overtaken the slow and foolish. For the first time in his life he had climbed to the tiptop of an elm tree. There among the topmost slender sprays he was feasting on elm-seeds, and came hurrying down at the first alarm-note. Just as he had nearly reached the ground, around the foot of the tree trunk was thrust the bloody face of the killer. There is something so devilish and implacable in the appearance of a hunting weasel, that it cows even the bravest of the smaller animals. A gray old rat, ordinarily a grim cynical fighter with no nerves to speak of, will run squealing in terror from before a weasel; while a rabbit, when it sees the red death on his trail, forgets his swiftness and cowers on the ground.

Something of the same spell came over Chippy as, for the first time, he faced the demon of his tribe. Yet he kept his head enough to realize that his only hope was aloft, and instantly whisked back up the great trunk. Unfortunately for him the versatile weasel is at home on, under, and above ground. The chipmunk had hardly reached the topmost branch, when he felt it sway under the quick, darting motions of his pursuer. Up and up he went, until he clung to the tiny swaying twigs at the very spire and summit of the elm, seventy-five feet from the ground.

In a moment, the bloody muzzle of his pursuer was

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sniffing along his trail. Hunting by scent, like all of its kind, the weasel wound his way up through the twigs, nearer and nearer to the trembling chipmunk. Twelve inches away, the weasel stopped and, thrusting out its long neck, seemed for the first time to see the little animal just above. A green gleam showed in the depths of the malignant eyes.

As it shifted its weight on the swaying twigs preparatory to the lightning-like pounce which would end the chase, the chipmunk, with a little wailing cry, let go his hold and fell like a stone down through the green screen of leaves and twigs that stretched between him and the ground far below. Even as he whirled through space, his little brain was alert to seize upon every chance for life. As he struck twig after twig, he clutched at them with his forepaws but could get no firm hand-hold. Fifty feet down, he managed to hook both of his little arms across a twig about the size of a man's thumb. A cross-twig kept his hold from slipping off, and swinging back and forth like a pendulum, he at last managed to clamber up into a crotch of this outer branch and crouched there, panting.

In a moment there was a scratching noise along the tree trunk, and the weasel came down in long spirals instead of climbing straight down as would a squirrel. The branch at the end of which the chipmunk was perched ran out from the main trunk, then turned at right angles and grew down almost perpendicularly, making a sharp elbow. The weasel descended, weaving his broad, triangular head back and forth,

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with little looping movements of his long neck, and sniffing the air as he came. When he reached the branch where the chipmunk was, he stopped and crept along the limb to the elbow. This was too much for him, skillful climber as he was. The perpendicular drop of the branch, its small size and smooth bark, all combined against him. Three times he tried to follow it down. Each time he slipped so that it became evident to him that another step would break his hold and send him crashing to the ground.

All this time the chipmunk was in full sight, yet the bloodshot eyes of his enemy seemed to overlook him entirely. Again and again the weasel sniffed the air, and repeatedly returned to the limb, evidently convinced that his intended prey was there.

Throughout, the chipmunk clung to the branch, silent and motionless. Only the throbbing of his silky white breast showed how his heart pounded as he watched the trailing death approaching. At last, the weasel seemed to give up the hunt and reluctantly wound his way down the main trunk and disappeared behind the tree.

For a full half-hour the chipmunk clung to his refuge without the slightest movement. Finally, when it seemed as if his pursuer were gone for good, the little animal moved cautiously up the branch, and managed to negotiate the elbow which had baffled his heavier pursuer. With the same caution he crept down the trunk and, after looking all around, finally leaped to the turf beyond. As he struck the ground, there was a rustle from the depths of a

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thicket a few rods away, and out darted the weasel, which, with the fierce patience of his kind, had been lurking there and came between the chipmunk and the scattered homes of the colony.

Over the hilltop was the only way of escape. There lay a patch of deep woods, where the trees grew thick and dark over a ledge of rock which stretched up to the very summit. There, too, was hidden some mystery as black as the shade above that lonely ledge. Often there had been no return for chipmunks crossing that dark crest. Instinctively the fugitive avoided the woods and circled the hill hoping to find some refuge on the farther side.

Long ago, the weasel-folk have learned that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. Wherefore to-day the hunter followed the diameter of the circle that the chipmunk was making around the wooded hilltop. Like a flash, with tail up and head down, the weasel wound his way among the rocks and crowded trees which covered the hill's crest. As his triangular head thrust itself beyond a pointed rock which jutted out from the ledge, his quick nostrils caught a sinister, sickly scent, and he checked in his stride but — too late. His flaming red eyes looked directly into the fixed glare of two other eyes, black, lidless, with strange oval pupils, and set deep in a cruel heart-shaped head, which showed a curious hole between eye and nostril, the hall-mark of the fatal family of pit-vipers to which the rattlesnake, copperhead, and moccasin belong.

For a second the fierce beast and the grim snake

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faced each other. The eyes of none of the mammals have a fiercer, more compelling gaze than those of the weasel-folk when red with the rage of slaughter. Yet no beast can outstare that grim ruler of the dark places of the forest, the timber rattlesnake, and in a moment the weasel started to dodge back. Not even his flashing speed, however, availed against the stroke of the snake. Faster than any eye could follow, the flat head shot forward, gaping horribly, while two keen movable fangs were thrust straight out like spear-points. They looked like crooked white needles, each with a hole in the side below the point, from which oozed the yellow venom. Before the darting weasel had time to gain the shelter of the rock, both fangs had pierced his side, and the great snake was back again in coil. Tottering as the deadly virus touched the tide of his fierce blood, and knowing that his life was numbered by seconds, the weasel yet sprang forward to die at death-grips with his foe. As he came, the great snake struck again, but as it snapped back into coil, the needle-like teeth of the other met in its brain. The great reptile thrashed and rattled, but the grip of the red killer remained unbroken long after both were still and stark.

Beyond the black circle of the woods, away from the fatal ledge and through the sunlight, the chipmunk sped, expecting every minute to hear the fierce patter of his pursuer close behind. Little by little he circled, until at last, hardly able to believe in his own escape, he found himself once more in the depths of his own burrow.

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As the spring lengthened into summer, Chippy found himself strangely interested in another burrow which had been dug near to his own. So, too, were half a dozen other gay young bucks of the colony, who, with tails erect and with sleek and well-groomed fur, frequently tried to visit the owner of said burrow. She treated them all alike. Every chipmunk who passed her front door received such a succession of nips and scratches that he was only too glad to back out again in a hurry.

As time went by, with every new experience and with every new escape, Chippy grew larger and wiser and stronger. Then came the glittering summer afternoon when he won the right to rank with the bravest and best of the colony. The heat eddied across the hill in shimmering waves as he started home from where he had been foraging, his cheek-pockets full of samples for his storehouse. As he neared his front door by the stone wall he saw Death itself entering his little neighbor's burrow. Black, sinuous, terrible, a giant blacksnake over six feet in length had found its way from its den on the other side of the hill to the chipmunk colony. Its smooth scales showed an absolute black in the sunlight, and made a crisp, rustling noise as it streamed over the dry leaves and grass of the hillside. Except for that sound, there was silence. At times the great snake would stop and, raising its head two feet from the ground and swaying back and forth, would stare here and there with fixed lidless eyes while the white patch on its lower jaw gleamed in the sun, and its

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long, black forked tongue played in and out like the flicker of a flame.

Suddenly the snake shot into Nippy's burrow. Over a third of its length had disappeared from sight when Chippy showed a flash of that instantaneous, unreckoning courage which carries man or beast into the front ranks of his kind. Perhaps what he did was to save himself from future danger. Yet who can say that it was not a spark of the same divine fire which glows in the heart of man that made him risk his life for another? As he saw the fatal head disappear down the burrow, with a lightning-like spring he leaped upon the disappearing body, casting out his cherished nuts from his cheeks in mid-air. Opening his wide-set jaws, he clamped them shut where the supple, flexible spine of the snake ridged the smooth skin. The back of a blacksnake is a mass of tough muscles, and its spine has the strength of a steel spring. Yet the tremendous jaw-muscles of the chipmunk drove the needle-pointed teeth deep into the twisted, over-lapping fibres.

The black column stiffened like an iron bar. Bracing his paws against the sides of the hole, the chipmunk gnawed away desperately. Suddenly the keen teeth grated, and then locked in the sinuous spine itself. As they met, the great body surged forward and dragged the chipmunk into the burrow. Once deep underground, there was danger that the snake might find space to double back on its length and gain a fatal head-hold with its sharp slanting teeth. Yet Chippy never loosed his grip for an

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instant. Dragging back with all his strength, he forced his clamped teeth deeper and deeper into the twisting spine. At last through the cold, bubbling blood, he felt the fibres of the vertebræ slowly give, until with a final rending tug he bit clear through the spinal cord.

By this time he was well below ground, and only the snake's tail thrashed and writhed ineffectually on the surface. Suddenly, as Chippy still gnawed and tugged, the lashings of the tail lessened, and through his clenched teeth he could feel something tugging and biting at it. Little by little the struggles of the snake became fainter, and Chippy no longer felt himself dragged forward. When at last they had died down to convulsive twists and shudders, which would last for hours, the battling chipmunk unlocked his jaws and backed out of the burrow. Bloody, bruised and exhausted he found himself once more safe in the sunlight.

Right in front of him was Nippy, worrying the wriggling tail with her sharp teeth like a little terrier. Aroused far underground by the sounds of the struggle she had rushed up toward the entrance. While still a long distance from it, her quick little ears caught the fierce hiss that the great snake gave at the first pang from the piercing teeth; and though this was her first year alone in the world, she knew that the sound meant death. Turning like a flash, she slipped into a by-passage and escaped to the upper air by an emergency exit concealed under a huckleberry bush. At her front door she found the

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tail of the crippled snake thrashing back and forth, and pouncing upon it, she helped her unseen ally by biting through the spine in two places at its narrowest point. When Chippy appeared, she let go, and by degrees the writhing body disappeared from the sight of the sun. Then, while Chippy lay and panted, the little owner of the burrow began to seal up the entrance of the haunted home in token that it was hers no longer. The front door once shut and locked, she moved slowly toward the top of the hill and — looked back.

Then was the time for Chippy to follow. Instead, he stiffly and haltingly betook himself to his own burrow. When, two days later, he came out, there was no trace of the fair and fleeting Nippy. For weeks he sought her everywhere, in the woods and pastures, and even to the shore of the little lake that cupped the farther side of the hill.

Then came a happening which drove all thoughts of anything but life and death from the minds of all the dwellers on the hillside. The doom which always hangs over the Little People fell upon them. In the gray hour just before the dawn, one fatal day, what looked like a brown squirrel, with a white throat and paws and a short tail, came to the chipmunk colony. Yet no squirrel ever had such blood-red eyes, such a serpent-like head, or a body so lithe and sinuous. The deadly visitor was none other than the lesser, or short-tailed, weasel, far more dangerous to the Little People than his larger kinsman, since he was small enough to enter their burrows.

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To-day he slipped like a shadow into the first burrow he found. It happened to be the very one of which the stranger chipmunk had dispossessed Chippy months before. This morning he had just waked up in his round sleeping-room when he heard the patter of the weasel down the long entrance tunnel. Out of one of his many exits the chipmunk dashed, but as he came above ground, the weasel was hard on his heels, and he turned to do battle for his life. As he was nearly as large as the weasel, the fight did not seem an unequal one; yet the chipmunk never had a chance. For a second the two faced each other, the chipmunk crouched low, the weasel with its swaying head raised high. Then the chipmunk lunged forward, desperately hoping to gain a grip with its two keen gnawing teeth. With a curve of its supple body, the weasel slipped the other's lead, and with almost the same motion gave that fatal counter which no animal has yet learned to parry. With a snap of the triangular muzzle, three of the long fighting teeth of the killer pierced with diabolical accuracy the chipmunk's skull at the exact point where it was thinnest, and crashed deep into its brain.

Stopping only to lap a little of the warm blood of its victim, the weasel flashed into the next burrow, where a mother chipmunk slept with her five babies, all rolled up in a round warm ball. To them all, death came mercifully swift. Then into the next burrow and the next this Death-in-the-dark hastened. None of the Little People he met escaped. Some fought, others fled, but neither courage nor fleetness

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availed. When, at last, the brown killer approached the burrow where Chippy lived, it had left behind it a trail of nearly a score of dead and dying victims, and yet was as tireless and terrible as ever. Each time that it slaked its vampire-thirst with fresh blood, it seemed to gain new strength and speed.

As the sun showed over Prindle Hill, Chippy started out of his front door. Even as he thrust his head into the open, he caught the sound of a faint squeal from a near-by burrow and saw the blood-stained muzzle of the weasel show in the early sunlight. As he dived back, his instantaneous brain seized upon the one way of escape remaining. The weasel could outrun him, and with his unerring nose unravel any tangle of tunnels. Yet the underground people have one last resource of their own, which a million years of being hunted to the death have taught them. To make use of this defense, however, the pursued must have a substantial start over the hunter, and to-day Chippy had but a few scant seconds, since the weasel had glimpsed the whisk of his tail as he plunged headlong down his front entrance, and had instantly started for his burrow.

With back humped high at every pattering plunge of its short legs, the weasel looked like a great inchworm measuring its way toward its prey. Yet, clumsy as its gait appeared, it was scarcely an instant before the bloody muzzle and red glaring eyes were thrust into the hole down which the chipmunk had disappeared. Much can be done, however, even in seconds, with a hair-trigger brain and nerves and

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muscles tensed by the fear of death. Like a flash, Chippy traversed the main passage of his burrow, dashed into a tunnel that forked off to the right, and then dived into a smaller branch, which angled off sharply from the larger tube. Then he suddenly doubled on his tracks, and popped into another passage, which ran in a long slant up to within a few inches of the surface of the hillside.

Once beyond the entrance to this last tunnel, the chipmunk dug for his very life's sake. With flashing strokes of his forepaws, he dislodged the soft earth at the sides of the passage, sweeping it back with his hind feet; and, even as the weasel writhed his way along the main passage, Chippy had sealed the doorway to the last tube which he had entered, so carefully that the blocked entrance could not be told from the rest of the surface of the passage-wall. Then he hurried swiftly and silently toward the surface.

Even as he dug his way up through the tough grass-roots, his fierce pursuer flashed into the tube from which the walled-up doorway led. With nose close to the ground, the weasel had followed the chipmunk's trail at full speed, nor had the branching and intersecting passages slowed his speed even for a moment. Only when he came to the spot where the chipmunk had doubled back to the sealed-up doorway, was he checked. Even his keen nostrils could not follow the trail through four inches of fresh earth.

As he came to a standstill, his microphonic ears caught the sound of distant digging far above him. Instantly, without wasting any time in hunting for

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the sealed tunnel, he turned and raced back to the entrance-hole, with such speed that, just as the chipmunk pushed his way to the surface well up the hillside, the weasel burst out of the main entrance below and dashed after him.

If the weasel's speed had not been slowed by slaughter, the chase would have been a short one. As it was, the chipmunk went over the crest of the hill a few rods ahead; but the gap lessened as his pursuer struck his gait and shot forward like an uncoiling spring. This time it seemed as if the chipmunk's last chance for life were gone. Above ground he was out-paced. To go underground again meant certain death. A miracle had saved him before from the other weasel — but nature seldom deals in miracles twice. Yet the little animal never weakened. A rabbit so close to death would have quit and cowered down, crying piteously until the weasel's teeth were in its throat. A rat would have lost its head and, running itself to a standstill, met its death frothing and squealing in mortal terror.

Chippy, however, concealed under his gentle, sprightly exterior a cool little brain, nor did ever a braver heart beat than throbbed under his white waistcoat. Although he seemed to be running at full speed, he was really holding something in reserve and already his flash-like mind had seized upon the one chance of life that was left. Earth and air had betrayed him. Perhaps water would be kinder. Straight toward the little lake he headed. Little by little the space between him and the killer behind

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lessened. By the time he had reached the roots of a black willow tree which stretched far out over the water, the snake-head of the weasel was not six feet behind the fluffy tail which Chippy still flaunted, the unlowered banner of his courage. Out upon the tree trunk he rushed, until he reached the farthest fork. Then, gathering himself together, he sprang from all four feet as if driven by a released spring and struck far out in the still water.

The sound of his splash had hardly died away before his brown pursuer launched himself into the air with a sort of double jump, starting with a spring from his short forelegs and ending with a tremendous drive from his squat hind legs. In spite of this clumsy take-off, the fierce force that shows in everything a weasel does, drove him a foot ahead of the chipmunk's mark. Followed a desperate race. Swimming high with jerky, uneven, rapid strokes, the weasel rushed through the water and foot by foot cut down the chipmunk's lead, until his teeth gnashed a scant yard back of the other's shoulder. There however the weasel hung. Swimming deeper, and with slower and more powerful strokes, the chipmunk refused to break his stroke by looking back. Only when the recurring ripples warned him that his pursuer was closing in on him did he put more power into the deep, regular beat of his strong little legs.

Slowly, very slowly, the better stroke began to tell. At first the weasel only stopped gaining. Then, little by little, the gap between the two

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widened. When it had stretched out to ten feet, the chipmunk shot ahead as if the other were anchored. The weasel's strokes became slower, and at last stopped. Flesh and blood, however fierce, has its limitations. The weasel had risked everything on his first desperate sprint. That failing, his reserves were gone, and he turned and slowly and pantingly swam back to the shore and passed out of Chippy's life forever.

Strongly and steadily the chipmunk swam on, until the farther shore, a quarter of a mile away, was reached. Wearily Chippy dragged himself up the beach to the dry hillside, staggering from exhaustion. There was no stone wall near, nor had he the strength to dig even the beginning of a burrow. Unprotected, in the open, he must take his chances until his strength came back. Then it was that nature relented, and once more another miracle was wrought for one of her loved Little People. Out of a hole on the hillside half-hidden by the pink blossoms of a steeple-bush, popped a small head, and for a golden moment Chippy gazed long and long into the eyes of Nippy. Then she turned back into her burrow, with a look that drew him totteringly after her. At the flood-tide of their lives they had met to become the founders of another colony, and to pass on undimmed the divine spark of courage and endurance and love.

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VI

THE PATH OF THE AIR

Deacon Jimmy Wadsworth was probably the most upright man in Cornwall. It was he who drove five miles one bitter winter night and woke up Silas Smith, who kept the store at Cornwall Bridge, to give him back three cents over-change. Silas's language, as he went back to bed, almost brought on a thaw.

The Deacon lived on the tiptop of the Cobble, one of the twenty-seven named hills of Cornwall, with Aunt Maria his wife, Hen Root his hired man, Nip Root his yellow dog and — the Ducks. The Deacon had rumpled white hair and a serene clear-cut face, and even when working, always wore a clean white shirt with a stiff bosom and no collar.

Aunt Maria was of the salt of the earth. She was spry and short, with a little face all wrinkled with good-will and good works, and had twinkling eyes of horizon-blue. If anyone was sick, or had unexpected company, or a baby, or was getting married or buried, Aunt Maria was always on hand, helping.

As for Hen, he cared more for his dog than he did for any human. When a drive for the Liberty Loan was started in Cornwall, he bought a bond for himself

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and one for Nip, and had the latter wear a Liberty Loan button in his collar.

Of course, the farm was cluttered up with horses, cows, chickens, and similar bric-a-brac, but the Ducks were part of the household. It came about this way: Rashe Howe, who hunted everything except work, had given the Deacon a tamed decoy duck, who seemed to have passed her usefulness as a lure. It was evident, however, that she had been trifling with Rashe, for before she had been on the farm a month, somewhere in sky or stream she found a mate. Later, down by the ice-pond, she stole a nest — a beautiful basin made of leaves and edged with soft down from her black-and-buff breast. There she laid ten blunt-ended, brown eggs, which she brooded until she was carried off one night by a wandering fox. Her mate went back to the wilds, and Aunt Maria put the eggs under a big clucking Brahma hen, who hatched out six soft yellow ducklings.

They had no more than come out of the shell when, with faint little quackings, they paddled out of the barnyard and started in single file for the pond. Although just hatched, each little duck knew its place in the line, and from that day on, the order never changed. The old hen, clucking frantically, tried again and again to turn them back. Each time they scattered and, waddling past her, fell into line once more. When at last they reached the bank, their foster-mother scurried back and forth squawking warnings at the top of her voice; but, one after another, each disobedient duckling plunged in with

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a bob of its turned-up tail, and the procession swam around and around the pond as if it would never stop.

This was too much for the old hen. She stood for a long minute, watching the ungrateful brood, and then turned away and evidently disinherited them upon the spot. From that moment she gave up the duties of motherhood, stopped setting and clucking, and never again recognized her foster-children, as they found out to their sorrow after their swim. All the rest of that day they plopped sadly after her, only to be received with pecks whenever they came too near. She would neither feed nor brood them, and when night came, they had to huddle in their deserted coop in a soft little heap, shivering and quacking beseechingly until daylight.

The next day Aunt Maria was moved by the sight of the six, weary but still pursuing the indifferent hen, keeping up the while a chorus of soft sorrowful little quackings, which ought to have touched her heart — but did n't. By this time they were so weak that, if Aunt Maria had not taken them into the kitchen and fed them and covered them up in a basket of flannel, they would never have lived through the second night.

Thereafter the old kitchen became a nursery. Six human babies could hardly have called for more attention, or have made more trouble, or have been better loved than those six fuzzy, soft, yellow ducklings. In a few days, the whole home-life on top of the Cobble centred around them. They needed so much nursing and petting and soothing, that it

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almost seemed to Aunt Maria as if a half-century had rolled back, and she was once more looking after babies long, long lost to her. Even old Hen became attached to them enough to cuff Nip violently when that pampered animal growled at the newcomers, and showed signs of abolishing them. From that moment Nip joined the Brahma hen in ignoring the ducklings completely. If any attention was shown them in his presence, he would stalk away majestically, as if overcome with astonishment that humans would spend their time over six yellow ducks instead of one yellow dog.

During the ducks' first days in the kitchen, someone had to be with them constantly. Otherwise all six of them would go "Yip, yip, yip," at the top of their voices. As soon as any one came to their cradle, or even spoke to them, they would snuggle down contentedly under the flannel, and sing like a lot of little tea-kettles, making the same kind of a sleepy hum that a flock of wild mallards gives when they are sleeping far out on the water. They liked the Deacon and Hen, but they loved Aunt Maria. In a few days they followed her everywhere around the house, and even out on the farm, paddling along just behind her, in single file, and quacking vigorously if she walked too fast.

One day she tried to slip out and go down to the sewing-circle at Mrs. Miner Rogers's at the foot of the hill; but they were on her trail before she had taken ten steps. They followed her all the way down, and stood with their beaks pressed against

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the bay-window, watching her as she sat in Mrs. Rogers's parlor. When they made up their minds that she had called long enough, they set up such a chorus of quackings that Aunt Maria had to come.

"Those pesky ducks will quack their heads off if I don't leave," she explained shamefacedly.

The road up-hill was a long, long trail for the ducklings. Every now and then they would stop and cry with their pathetic little yipping note, and lie down flat on their backs, and hold their soft little paddles straight up in the air, to show how sore they were. The last half of the journey they made in Aunt Maria's apron, singing away contentedly as she plodded up the hill.

As they grew older, they took an interest in everyone who came; and if they did not approve of the visitor, would quack deafeningly until he went. Once Aunt Maria happened to step suddenly around the corner of the house as a load of hay went past. Finding her gone, the ducks started solemnly down the road, following the hay-wagon, evidently convinced that she was hidden somewhere beneath the load. They were almost out of sight when Aunt Maria called to them. At the first sound of her voice, they turned and hurried back, flapping their wings and paddling with all their might, quacking joyously as they came.

Aunt Maria and the flock had various little private games of their own. Whenever she sat down, they would tug at the neatly tied bows of her shoelaces, until they had loosened them; whereupon she

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would jump up and rush at them, pretending great wrath; whereupon they would scatter on all sides, quacking delightedly. When she turned back, they would form a circle around her, snuggling their soft necks against her gown until she scratched each uplifted head softly. If she wore button-shoes they would pry away at the loose buttons and attempt to swallow them. When she was working in her flower-garden, they would bother her by swallowing some of the smallest bulbs, and snatching up and running away with larger ones. At other times they would hide in dark corners and rush out at her with loud and terrifying quacks, at which Aunt Martha would pretend to be much frightened and scuttle away, pursued by the six.

All three of the family were forever grumbling about the flock. To hear them, one would suppose that their whole lives were embittered by the trouble and expense of caring for a lot of useless, greedy ducks. Yet when Hen suggested roast duck for Thanksgiving, Deacon Jimmy and Aunt Maria lectured him so severely for his cruelty, that he was glad to explain that he was only joking. Once, when the ducks were sick, he dug angleworms for them all one winter afternoon, in the corner of the pigpen where the ground still remained unfrozen; and Deacon Jimmy nearly bankrupted himself buying pickled oysters, which he fed them as a tonic.

It was not long before they outgrew their baby clothes, and wore the mottled brown of the mallard duck, with a dark steel-blue bar edged with white on

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either wing. The leader evidently had a strain of black duck in her blood. She was larger, and lacked the trim bearing of the aristocratic mallard. On the other hand, Blackie had all the wariness and sagacity of the black duck, than whom there is no wiser bird. As the winter came on, a coop was fixed up for them not far from the kitchen, where they slept on warm straw in the coldest weather, with their heads tucked under their soft, down-lined wings up to their round, bright eyes. The first November snowstorm covered their coop out of sight; but when Aunt Maria called, they quacked a cheery answer back from under the drift.

Then came the drake, a gorgeous mallard with a head of emerald-green and a snow-white collar, and with black, white, gray, and violet wings, in all the pride and beauty of his prime. A few days and nights before he had been a part of the North. Beyond the haunts of men, beyond the farthest forests, where the sullen green of the pines gleamed against a silver sky, a great waste-land stretched clear to the tundras, beyond which is the ice of the Arctic. In this wilderness, where long leagues of rushes hissed and whispered to the wind, the drake had dwelt. Here and there were pools of green-gray water, and beyond the rushes stretched the bleached brown reeds, deepening in the distance to a dark tan. In the summer a heavy, sweet scent had hung over the marshland, like the breath of a herd of sleeping cattle. Here had lived uncounted multitudes of waterfowl.

As the summer passed, a bitter wind howled like a

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wolf from the North with the hiss of snow in its wings. Sometimes by day, when little flurries of snow whirled over the waving rushes; sometimes by night, when a misty moon struggled through a gray wrack of cloud, long lines and crowded masses of water-birds sprang into the air, and started on the far journey southward. There were gaggles of wild geese flying in long wedges, with the strongest and the wisest gander leading the converging lines; wisps of snipe, and badlings of duck of many kinds. The widgeons flew with whistling wings, in long black streamers. The scaup came down the sky in dark masses, giving a rippling purr as they flew. Here and there scattered couples of blue-winged teal shot past groups of the slower ducks. Then down the sky, in a whizzing parallelogram, came a band of canvasbacks, with long red heads and necks and gray-white backs. Moving at the rate of a hundred and sixty feet a second, they passed pintails, black duck, and mergansers as if they had been anchored, grunting as they flew.

When the rest of his folk sprang into the air, the mallard drake had refused to leave the cold pools and the whispering rushes. Late that season he had lost his mate, and, lonely without her and hoping still for her return, he lingered among the last to leave. As the nights went by, the marshes became more and more deserted. Then there dawned a cold, turquoise day. The winding streams showed sheets of sapphire and pools of molten silver. That afternoon the sun, a vast globe of molten red, sank through an old-rose sky, which slowly changed to a faint golden green.

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For a moment it hung on the knife-edge of the world, and then dipped down and was gone.

Through the violet twilight five gleaming, misty-white birds of an unearthly beauty, glorious trumpeter swans, flew across the western sky in strong, swift, majestic flight. As the shadows darkened like spilt ink, their clanging notes came down to the lonely drake. When the swans start south, it is no time for lesser folk to linger. The night was aflame with its million candles as he sprang into the air, circled once and again, and followed southward the moon path which lay like a long streamer of gold across the waste-lands. Night and day and day and night and night and day again he flew, until, as he passed over the northwestern corner of Connecticut, that strange food sense which a migrating bird has, brought him down from the upper sky into the one stretch of marshland that showed for miles around. It chanced to be close to the base of the Cobble.

All night long he fed full among the pools. Just as the first faint light showed in the eastern sky, he climbed upon the top of an old muskrat house that showed above the reeds. At the first step, there was a sharp click, the fierce grip of steel, and he was fast in one of Hen's traps. There the old man found him at sunrise, and brought him home wrapped up in his coat, quacking, flapping, and fighting every foot of the way. An examination showed his leg to be unbroken, and Hen held him while Aunt Maria with a pair of long shears clipped his beautiful wings. Then, all gleaming green and violet, he was set down among

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the six ducks, who had been watching him admiringly.

The second he was loosed, he gave his strong wings a flap that should have lifted him high above the hateful earth, where tame folk set traps for wild folk. Instead of swooping toward the clouds, the clipped wings beat the air impotently, and did not even raise his orange, webbed feet from the ground. Again and again the drake tried to fly, only to realize at last that he was clipped and shamed and earthbound. Then for the first time he seemed to notice the six who stood by, watching him in silence. To them he quacked, and quacked, and quacked fiercely, and Aunt Maria had an uneasy feeling that she and her shears were the subject of his remarks. Suddenly he stopped, and all seven started toward their winter quarters; and lo and behold! at the head of the procession marched the gleaming drake, with the deposed Blackie trailing meekly in second place.

From that day forth he was their leader; nor did he forget his wrongs. The sight of Aunt Maria was always a signal for a burst of impassioned quackings. Soon it became evident that the ducks were reluctantly convinced that the gentle little woman had been guilty of a great crime, and more and more they began to shun her. There were no more games and walks and caressings. Instead the six followed the drake's lead in avoiding as far as possible humans who trapped and clipped the people of the air.

At first the Deacon put the whole flock in a great pen where the young calves were kept in spring, fearing lest the drake might wander away. This,

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of course, was no imprisonment to the ducks, who could fly over the highest fence. The first morning, after they had been penned, the ducks sprang over the fence and started for the pond, quacking to the drake to follow. When he quacked back that he could not, the flock returned and showed him again and again how easy it was to fly over the fence. At last he evidently made them understand that for him flying was impossible. Several times they started for the pond, but each time at a quack from the drake they came back. It was Blackie who finally solved the difficulty. Flying back over the fence, she found a place where a box stood near one of the sides of the pen. Climbing up on top of this, she fluttered to the top rail. The drake clambered up on the box, and tried to follow. As he was scrambling up the fence, with desperate flappings of his disabled wings, Blackie and the others, who had joined her on the top rail, reached down and pulled him upward with tremendous tugs from their flat bills, until he finally scrambled to the top and was safely over. For several days this went on, and the flock would help him out of and into the pen every day, as they went to and from the pond. When at last Aunt Maria saw this experiment in prison-breaking, she threw open the gate wide, and thereafter the drake had the freedom of the farm with the others. As the days went by, he seemed to become more reconciled to his fate and at times would even take food from Aunt Maria's hand; yet certain reserves and withdrawings on the part of the whole flock were always apparent, to vex her.

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At last and at last, just when it seemed as if winter would never go, spring came. There were flocks of wild geese beating, beating, beating up the sky, never soaring, never resting, thrusting their way north in a great black-and-white wedge, outflying spring, and often finding lakes and marshes still locked against them. Then came the strange, wild call from the sky of the killdeer, who wears two black rings around his white breast; and the air was full of robin notes and bluebird calls and the shrill high notes of the hylas. On the sides of the Cobble the bloodroot bloomed, with its snowy petals and heart of gold and root dripping with burning, bitter blood — frail flowers which the wind kisses and kills. Then the beech trees turned all lavender-brown and silver, and the fields of April wheat made patches of brilliant velvet green.

At last there came a day blurred with glory, when the grass was a green blaze, and the woods dripped green, and the new leaves of the apple trees were like tiny jets of green flame among the pink and white blossoms. The sky was full of waterfowl going north. All that day the drake had been uneasy. One by one he had moulted his clipped wing-feathers, and the long curved quills which had been his glory had come back again. Late in the afternoon, as he was leading his flock toward the kitchen, a great hubbub of calls and cries floated down from the afternoon sky. The whole upper air was black with ducks. There were teal, wood-ducks, baldpates, black duck, pintails, little bluebills, whistlers, and suddenly a great mass of mallards, the green heads of the drakes

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gleaming against the sky. As they flew they quacked down to the little earthbound group below.

Suddenly the great drake seemed to realize that his power was upon him once more. With a great sweep of his lustrous wings, he launched himself forth into the air in a long arrowy curve, and shot up through the sky toward the disappearing company — and not alone. Even as he left the ground, before Aunt Maria's astonished eyes, faithful, clumsy, wary Blackie sprang into the air after him, and with the strong awkward flight of the black duck, which ploughs its way through the air by main strength, she overtook her leader, and the two were lost in the distant sky.

Aunt Maria took what comfort she could out of the five who remained, but only now that they had gone, did she realize how dear to her was Greentop, the beautiful, wild, resentful drake, and Blackie, awkward, wise, resourceful Blackie. The flock too was lost without them, and took chances and overlooked dangers which they never would have been allowed to do under the reign of their lost king and queen. At last fate overtook them one dark night when they were sleeping out. That vampire of the darkness, a wandering mink, came upon them. With their passing went something of love and hope, which left the Cobble a very lonely place for the three old people.

As the nights grew longer, Aunt Maria would often dream that she heard the happy little flock singing like teakettles in their basket, or that she heard them quack from their coop, and would call out to comfort

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them. Yet always it was only a dream. Then the cold came, and one night a great storm of snow and sleet broke over the Cobble, and the wind howled as it did the night before the drake was found. Suddenly Aunt Maria started out of her warm bed, and listened. When she was sure she was not dreaming, she awakened the Deacon, and through the darkness they hurried down to the door, from the other side of which sounded tumultuous and familiar quackings.

With trembling hands she lighted the lamp, and as they threw open the door, in marched a procession. It was headed by Greentop, resentful no more, but quacking joyously at the sight of light and shelter. Back of him Blackie's soft, dark head rubbed lovingly against Aunt Maria's trembling knees, with the little caressing, crooning noise which Blackie always made when she wanted to be petted. Back of her, quacking embarrassedly, waddled four more ducks who showed their youth by their size and the newness of their feathering. Greentop and Blackie had come back, bringing their family with them.

The tumult and the shouting aroused old Hen, who hurried down in his night clothes. These, by the way, were the same as his day clothes except for the shoes; for, as Hen said, he could not be bothered with dressing and undressing except during the bathing season, which was long past.

"Durned if it ain't them pesky ducks again," he said, grinning happily.

"That's what it be," responded Deacon Jimmy, "I don't suppose now we 'll have a moment's peace."

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"Yes, it's them good-for-nothin' — " began Aunt Maria; but she gulped and something warm and wet trickled down her wrinkled cheeks, as she stopped and pulled two dear-loved heads, one green and the other black, into her arms.

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VII

BLACKCAT

ABOVE the afterglow gleamed a patch of beryl-green. Etched against the color was the faintest, finest, and newest of crescent moons. It seemed almost as if a puff of wind would blow it, like a cobweb, out of the sky. As the shifting tints deepened into the unvarying peacock-blue of a Northern night, the evening star flared like a lamp hung low in the west while the dark strode across the shadows of the forest, cobalt-blue against the drifted snow. As the winter stars flamed into the darkening sky, a tide of night-life flowed and throbbed under the silent trees. One by one the wild folk came forth, to live and love and die in this their day, even as we humans in ours.

Long after the twilight had dimmed into the jeweled darkness, opalescent with the changing colors of the Northern Lights, from the inner depths of the woods there came a threat to the life of nearly everyone of the forest folk. Yet it seemed but the mournful wail of a little child. Only to the moose, the black-bear and the wolverine was it other than the very voice of Death.

Fifty feet above the ground, from a blasted and hollow white pine, the plaintive sound again

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shuddered down the wind. From a hollow under an overhanging bough, a brownish-black animal moved slowly down the tree trunk, headfirst, which position marked him as a past-master among the tree folk. Only those climbers who are absolutely at home aloft go forward down a perpendicular tree trunk. As the beast came out of the shadow it resembled nothing so much as a big black cat, with a bushy tail and a round, grayish head. Because of this appearance the trappers had named it the blackcat. Others call it the fisher, although it never fishes, while to the Indians it is the *pekan* — the killer-in-the-dark. In spite of its rounded head and mild doggy face, the fisher belongs to those killers, the weasels. Next to the wolverine, he is the most powerful of his family, and he is far and away the most versatile.

To-night, on reaching the ground, the pekan followed one of the many runways he had discovered in the ten-mile beat that formed his hunting-ground. Like most of the weasels, he lived alone. His brief and dangerous family life lasted but a few days in the fall of every year. When his mate tried to kill him unawares, the blackcat knew that his honeymoon was over, and departed again to his hollow tree, many miles from Mrs. Blackcat. To-night, as he moved at a leisurely pace across the snow, in a series of easy bounds, his lithe black body looped itself along like a hunting snake, while his broad forehead gave him an innocent, open look. If in the tree he had resembled a cat, on the ground he looked more like a dog.

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There was one animal who was not misled by the frank openness of the fisher's face. That one was a hunting pine marten, who had just come across a red squirrel's nest made of woven sticks thatched with leaves, and set in the fork of a moose-wood sapling some thirty feet from the ground. Cocking his head on one side, the marten regarded the swaying nest critically out of his bright black eyes. Convinced that it was occupied, with a dart he dashed up the slender trunk, which bent and shook under his rush.

But Chickaree had craftily chosen a tree that would bend under the lightest weight, and signal the approach of any unwelcome visitor. Before the marten had covered half the distance, four squirrels boiled out of the nest and, darting to the end of the farthest twigs, leaped to the nearest trees and scurried off into the darkness. The marten had poised himself for a spring when he saw the fisher gazing up at him. Straightway he forgot that there were squirrels in the world. With a tremendous spring, he landed on the trunk of a near-by hemlock and slipped around it like a shadow.

It was too late. With a couple of effortless bounds, the blackcat reached the trunk and slipped up it with the ease and speed of a blacksnake. The marten doubled and twisted and turned on his trail, and launched himself surely and swiftly from dizzy heights at arrowy speed. Yet, spring and dash as he would, there was always a pattering rush just behind him. Before the branches, which crackled and bent under the lithe golden-brown body, had stopped

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waving, they would crash and sag under the black weight of the fisher. With every easy bound the black came nearer to the gold. The pine marten is the swiftest tree-climber in the world, bar one. The blackcat is that one. As the two great weasels flashed through the trees, they seemed to be running tandem. Every twist and turn of the golden leader was followed automatically by the black wheeler, as if the two were connected by an invisible, but unbreakable bond.

Under the strain it was the nerves of the marten which gave way first. Not that he stopped, and cowered, helpless and shaking, like the rabbit-folk, nor ran frothing and amuck as do rat-kind when too hardly pressed. No weasel, while he lives, ever loses his head completely. Only now the marten ran more and more wildly, relying on straight speed and overlooking many a chance for a puzzling double, which would have given him a breathing-space. The imperturbable blackcat noted this, and began to take short cuts, which might have lost him his prey at the beginning of the hunt.

At last, the long and circling chase brought them both near an enormous white pine, which towered some forty feet away from the nearest tree. A bent spruce leaned out toward the lone pine. With a flying leap, the marten reached the spruce and flashed up the trunk, with never a look behind. His crafty pursuer saw his chance. Landing in a lower crotch of the spruce, with a flying take-off he launched himself outward and downward into mid-air, with every

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ounce and atom of spring that his steel-wire muscles held. It seemed impossible that anything without wings could cover the great gap between the two trees; but the blackcat knew to an inch what he could do, and almost to an inch did the distance tax his powers. In a wide parabola his black body whizzed through the air half a hundred feet above the ground, beginning as a round ball of fur, which stretched out until the fisher hung full length at the crest of his spring. If the tree had been a scant six inches farther away, the blackcat would never have made it. As it was, the huge clutching, horn-colored claws of his forepaws just caught, and held long enough to allow him to clamp down his hold with his hind paws.

The marten, who had started fifty feet ahead of the blackcat and had lost his distance by having to climb up, jump, and then climb down, passed along the trunk of the pine on his way to the ground just as the blackcat landed, his lead cut down to a scant ten feet. Without a pause, the pekan deliberately sprang out into the air and disappeared in a snow bank full forty feet below. Not many animals, even with a snow buffer, could stand a drop of that distance, but the great black weasel burst out of the snow, his steel-bound frame apparently unjarred, and stood at the foot of the tree.

As the marten reached the ground and saw what was awaiting him, his playful face seemed to turn into a mask of rage and despair. The round black eyes flamed red, the lips curved back from the sharp teeth in a horrible grin, and with a shrieking snarl and a

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lightning-like snap he tried for the favorite throat-hold of the weasel-folk. He was battling, however, with one quite as quick and immeasurably more powerful. With a little bob the blackcat slipped the lead of his adversary, and the flashing teeth of the marten closed only on the loose tough skin of the fisher's shoulder. Before he could strike again the blackcat had the smaller animal clutched in its fierce claws, with no play to parry the counter-thrust of the black muzzle. In another second, the golden throat was dabbled with blood, which the fisher drank in great gulps like the weasel that he was. According to human notions, the dreadful and uncanny part of the contest was that, throughout the whole fight and the blood-stained finish, the blackcat's face was the mild, reflective, round face of a gentle dog.

His first blood-thirst slaked, the fisher slung the limp body of the marten over his shoulder with a single flirt of his black head, and winding his way up the tree trunk, cached it for a time in a convenient crotch, feeling sure that no prowler would meddle with a prey which bore upon its pelt the scent and seal of the blackcat.

All through a two-day snowstorm, the fisher had kept to his tree, and his first kill that night only sharpened the blood-lust which swept raging through his tense body. Following the nearest runway, he came to the shore of a wide, rapid, little forest river, which at this point had a fall which insured current enough to keep it from freezing. Near its bank, the ranging blackcat came upon a fresh track in the

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soft snow. First there were five marks — one small, two large, and two small. The next track showed only four marks with the order reversed, the larger marks being in front, instead of behind the smaller. A little way farther on, and the smaller marks, instead of being side by side, showed one behind the other.

The blackcat read this snow-riddle at a glance. The five marks showed where a northern hare, or snowshoe rabbit, had been sitting; the fifth mark being where its bobbed tail had touched the snow. The larger marks had been the marks of the fur snowshoes, which it wears in winter on its big hopping hind-legs, and the smaller the mark of the little forepaws which, when he was sitting, naturally touched the ground in front of the hind paws. When the hare hopped the position was reversed, as the big hind paws, with every hop, struck the ground in front of the others, the hare traveling in the direction of the larger marks. The last tracks showed that the hare had either scented or seen its pursuer; for a hare's eyes are so placed that it can see either forward or backward as it hops. As the little forelegs touched the ground, they were twisted one behind the other so as to secure the greatest leverage possible.

The blackcat settled doggedly down to the chase. Although far slower in a straightaway run than either the hare or the fox, it can and will run down either in a long chase, although it may take a day to do it. To-night the chase came to a sudden and unexpected end. The hare described a great circle nearly half a mile in diameter, at full speed, and then, whiter than

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the snow itself, squatted down to watch his back trail and determine whether his pursuer was really intending to follow him to a finish. Before long, the squatting hare saw a black form on the other side of the circle, with humped back looping its way along. At such a sight the smaller cottontail rabbit would have run a short distance, and would then have crouched in the snow, squealing in fear of its approaching death. The hare is made of sterner stuff. Moreover, this one was a patriarch fully seven years old — a great age for any hare to have accomplished in a world full of foes.

Wabasso, as Hiawatha named him, had not attained to this length of years without encountering blackcats. In some unknown way, probably by a happy accident, he had learned the one defense which a hare may interpose to the attack of a fisher, and live. Reaching full speed almost immediately, he cleared the snow in ten-foot bounds, four to the second, while the wide, hairy snowshoes, which nature fits to his white feet every winter, kept him from sinking much below the surface.

The keen eyes of the blackcat caught sight of the hare's first bound in spite of his protective coloration, and he at once cut across the diameter of the circle. In spite of this short cut, the hare reached the bank of the open river many yards ahead. Well out in the midst of the rushing icy water lay a sand bar, now covered with snow. To the blackcat's amazement and disgust, and contrary to every tradition of the chase, this unconventional hare plunged with a desperate

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bound fully ten feet out into the icy water. Wabasso was no swimmer, and had evidently elected to travel by water in the same way which he had found successful by land. Kicking mightily with his hind legs he hopped his way through the water, raising himself bodily at every kick, only to sink back until but the top of his white nose showed. Nevertheless, in a wonderfully short time he had won his way through the wan water, and lay panting and safe on the sand bank. If pursued, he could take to the water again and hop his way to either shore, along which he could run and take to the water whenever it was necessary.

To-night no such tactics were needed. The fisher, in spite of his name, hates water. He can swim, albeit slowly and clumsily, in the summer time. As for leaping into a raging torrent of ice-cold water — it was not to be considered. The blackcat raced up and down the bank furiously, and not until convinced that the rabbit was on that snow bank for the night, did he give up the hunt and go bounding along the bank of the river after other and easier prey. For the first time that night the mildness of his face was marred by a snarling curl of the lips, showing the full set of cruel fighting teeth with which every weasel, large or small, is equipped.

As the blackcat followed the line of the river, his sharp ear caught a steady and monotonous sound, like someone using a peculiarly dull saw. Around a bend the still water was frozen. Against the side of the bank an empty pork-keg had drifted down from some lumberman's camp, and frozen into the ice.

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THE SAFE RABBIT

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In front of the shattered keg crouched a large, blackish, hairy animal, gnawing as if paid by the hour. It was none other than the Canada porcupine — "Old Man Quillpig," as he is called by the lumberjacks, who hate him because he gnaws to sawdust every scrap of wood that has ever touched salt. The porcupine saw the blackcat, but never ceased gnawing. Many and many an animal has thought that he could kill sluggish, stupid Quillpig. The wolf, the lynx, the panther, and the wildcat all have tried — and died. So to-night the porcupine kept on with his gnawing, under the star-shine, convinced that no animal that lived could solve his defense.

But the blackcat is one of two animals which have no fear of the quillpig. Blackbear is the other. With its swift, sinuous gait, the pekan came closer, whereupon Quillpig unwillingly stopped his sawing and thrust his head under the broken, frozen staves of the barrel. His belly hugged the ground, and in an instant he seemed to swell to double his normal size as he erected his quills and lashed this way and that with his spiked tail. Pure white, with dark tips, the quills were thickly barbed down to the extreme point, which is smooth and keen. The barbs are envenomed, and wherever they touch living flesh cause it to rankle, swell, and fester for all save the pekan, whose flesh is immune to the virus.

To-night the blackcat wasted no time. Disregarding the bristling quills and the lashing tail, the crafty weasel suddenly inserted a quick paw beneath the gnawer, and with a tremendous jerk tipped him over

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on his bristling back. Before the quillpig could right himself, the fisher had torn open his unguarded belly, and proceeded to eat the quivering, flabby meat as if from the shell of an oyster, or to be more accurate, a sea urchin. Throughout these proceedings he disregarded the quills entirely. Many of them pierced his skin. Others were swallowed along with the mouthfuls of warm flesh, which he tore out and greedily devoured. By reason of some unknown charm, the barbed quills work out of a blackcat without harm, and pass through his intestines in clusters, like packages of needles, without any inconvenience, although in any other animal save the bear they would inevitably cause death.

As the pekan ate and ate, the stars began to dim in the blue-black sky, and a faint flush in the east announced the end of his hunting day. With a farewell mouthful, he started back through the snow for his hollow tree, making a long detour, to bring in the cached marten. As he approached the tree from whose crotch the slim golden body dangled, his leisurely lope changed into a series of swift bounds. For the first time, a snarl came from behind the pekan's mask. The dead marten was gone from the tree. In an open space which the wind had swept nearly clear of snow, it lay under the huge paws of a shadowy gray animal, with luminous pale yellow eyes, a curious bob of a tail, and black tufted ears. For all the world, it looked like a gray cat, but such a cat as never lived in a house. Three feet long, and forty pounds in weight, the Canada lynx is surpassed in size only among its North

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American relatives by that huger yellow cat, the puma or panther.

At the snarl of the fisher, the cat looked up, and at the sight of the gliding black figure gave a low spitting growl and contemptuously dropped his great head to the marten's bloody throat. For a moment the big black weasel and the big gray cat faced each other. At first sight, it did not seem possible that the smaller animal would attack the larger, or that, if he did, he would last long. The fisher was less than half the size and weight of the lynx, who also outwardly seemed to have more of a fighting disposition. The tufted ears alert, the eyes gleaming like green fire, and the bristling hair and arched back, contrasted formidably with the broad forehead and round, honest face of the fisher.

So, at least, it seemed to young Jim Linklater, who, with his uncle Dave, the trapper, lay crouched close in a hemlock copse. Long before daylight, the two had traveled on silent snowshoes up the river bank, laying a trap-line, carrying nothing but a back-load of steel traps. At the rasping growl of the lynx, they peered out of their covert only to find themselves not thirty feet away from the little arena.

"That old lucifee'll rip that poor, little, black innocent to pieces in jig-time," whispered young Jim.

Old Dave shook his grizzled head. He pulled his nephew's ample ear firmly and painfully close to his mouth.

" Son," he hissed, " you and that lucifee are both goin' to have the surprise of your lives."

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Unwitting of his audience, the weasel approached the cat swiftly. Suddenly with a hoarse screech, the lynx sprang, hoping to land with all his weight on the humped-up black back, and then bring into play his ripping curved claws, while he sank his teeth deep into his opponent's spine.

It was at once evident that lynx tactics have not yet been adapted to blackcat service. Without a sound, the pekan swerved like a shadow to one side, and almost before the lynx had touched the ground, the fisher's fierce cutting teeth had severed the tendon of a hind leg, while its curved claws slashed deep into the soft inner flank.

The great cat screeched with rage and pain and sheer astonishment. As he landed, the crippled leg bent under him. Even yet he had one advantage which no amount of courage or speed on the part of the pekan could have overcome. If only the lynx had gripped the dead marten, and sprung out into the deep snow, the fisher would have had to fight a losing fight. Like the hare, the lynx is shod with snowshoes in the winter, on which he can pad along on snow in which a fisher would sink deep at every step. In spite of his formidable appearance, however, the lynx has a plentiful lack of brains. As his leg doubled under his weight, this one in a panic threw himself on his back, the traditional cat attitude of defense, ready to bring into action all four of his sets of ripping claws, with his teeth in reserve.

Against another of the cat tribe such a defense would have been good. Against the pekan it was

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fatal. No battler in the world is a better in-fighter than the blackcat, and any antagonist near his size, who invites a clinch, rarely comes out of it alive. The pekan first circled the spinning, yowling, slashing lynx more and more rapidly, until there came a time when the side of the gray throat lay before him for a second unguarded. It was enough. With a pounce like the stroke of a coiled rattler, the pekan sprang, and a double set of the most effective fighting teeth known among mammals met deep in the lynx's throat. With all of his sharp eviscerating claws, the great cat raked his opponent. But the blackcat, protected by his thick pelt and tough muscles, was content to exchange any number of surface slashes for the throat-hold. Deeper and deeper the crooked teeth dug; and then with a burst of bright blood, they pierced the jugular vein itself. The struggles of the lynx became weaker and weaker, until, with a last convulsive shudder, the gray body stretched out stark in the snow. The weasel lay panting and lapping at the hot, welling blood, while his own ran down his black fur in unconsidered streams.

It was young Jim who first broke the silence.

"Those pelt 'll bring all of twenty-five dollars," he remarked, stepping forward.

"Help yourself," suggested old Dave, not stirring, however, from where he stood.

At the voices the black weasel sprang up like a flash. With one paw on the dead lynx and another on the marten, he faced the two men in absolute silence.

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The eyes under the mild forehead flamed red and horrible and the dripping body quivered for another throat-hold.

"Seems like Mr. Blackcat wants 'em both," murmured the old man, discreetly withdrawing from the farther side of the copse. Jim gazed into the flaming eyes a moment longer and then followed his uncle.

"He don't look so blame innocent after all," he observed.

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VIII

LITTLE DEATH

For three long months the blue-white snow had lain over the gold-white sand among the dark-green pitch pines standing like trees from a Noah's Ark. To-day the woods were a vast sea of green, lapping at the white sand-land that had been thrust up, a wedge from the South, into the very heart of the North. A crooked stream had cut its course deep through the forest. On its high bank the ghost-like glory of a mountain laurel overhung the dark water. Close to the water's edge were clumps of the hollow, crimson-streaked leaves of the pitcher plant, lined with thousands of tiny teeth all pointing downward, traps for unwary insects. All the winter these pitchers had been filled with clear cone-shaped lumps of ice; but to-day, above the fatal leaves, on long stems, swung great blossoms, wine-red, crimson, aquamarine, pearl-white, and pale gold.

From overhead came the trilling song of the pine warbler, like a chipping sparrow lost in the woods; and here and there could be caught glimpses of his pale yellow breast and white wing-bars. Below, among the tangled scrub oaks, flitted the brilliant yellow-and-black prairie warbler, while everywhere

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the chewinks called "Drink your tea," and the Maryland yellow-throat sang "Witchery, witchery, witchery," while jays squalled in the distance, and crimson-crested cardinals whistled from the thickets. In the sky, like grim black aeroplanes, wheeled the turkey buzzards, sailing in circles without ever a wing stroke. Gray pine-swifts, with brilliant blue patches on their sides, scurried up and down tree trunks and along fallen logs, and brown cottontail rabbits hopped across the paths, showing their white powder puffs at each jump. A huge, umber-brown-and-white pine snake, with a strange pointed head, crawled slowly through the brush while rows of painted turtles dotted the snags which thrust out here and there above the stream.

Earth, air, and water, all swarmed with life at this dawn of the year. The underground folk were awake, too. Down below the surface, the industrious mole, with his plush fur and spade-like hands, dug incessantly his hunting-tunnels for earthworms. Above him, in wet places, his cousin, the star-nosed mole, whose nose has twenty-two little fingers, drove passages through the lowest part of the moss beds and the soft upper mould.

Still nearer the surface, just under the leaf-carpet, sometimes digging his own way, sometimes using the tunnels of the meadow-mice and deer-mice, and occasionally flashing out into the open air, lived the smallest mammal. Of all the tribes of earth, of all the bat-folk who fly the air, or the water-people who swim the seas and rivers and lakes, no mammal

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is so little. From the tip of his wee pointed muzzle to the base of his tiny tail, he was just about the length of a man's little finger, or about two and a half inches. Nature had handicapped her smallest child heavily. Blind, earless, and tiny, yet every twenty-four hours he must kill and eat his own weight in flesh and blood; for so fiercely swift are the functions of his strange, wee body, that, lacking food for even six hours, the blind killer starves and dies.

To-day, near the edge of the stream, in the soft, white sand, his trail showed. It looked like a string of tiny exclamation points. Suddenly, from a patch of dry leaves there sounded a long rustling, like the crawling of a snake. Nothing could be seen, yet the leaves heaved and moved here and there, as something pushed its way under the surface of the leaf-carpet. Then, the masked shrew — for so we humans have named this escape from Lilliput — flashed out into the open. His glossy, silky fur was brown above and whitish-gray underneath; and between the hidden, unseeing eyes and the holes which took the place of ears was a dark smoky-gray mark, like a mask. His head angled into a long whiskered snout, so pointed that from above the shrew looked like a big pen. This flexible muzzle he twisted here and there, sniffing uncertainly, for the shrew has but little sense of smell. In fact, he seems to have traded the greater part of his other senses for a double portion of two — touch and hearing. Not even the long-eared rabbit can detect the faintest shade of a sound quicker than the shrew, and only the bat equals his sense of touch.

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Like that flyer, the shrew can detect an obstacle in time to avoid it, even when running at full speed, by becoming conscious of some subtle change in the air-pressure.

Among the great throng of little wild folk playing at hide-and-seek with death among the fallen logs, and in the labyrinth of passageways in the beds of sand and moss and fern, no one was swifter than this one, the smallest of them all. A flash here, a glimpse farther on, and he was gone, too fast to be followed by human eyes. In one of his rare pauses he might have been mistaken for a tiny mouse by reason of his general coloration; yet the shrew is as different from the mouse as a lynx from a wolf. No mouse has long, crooked, crocodile jaws, filled with perhaps the fiercest fighting teeth of any mammal; nor does any mouse have the tremendous jaw muscles which stood out under the soft fur of this beastling.

To-day, as the shrew sniffed here and there, trying to locate trails which a weasel or a dog could have followed instantly, his quick ear caught some tiny sound from the near-by burrow of a meadow-mouse. With a curious pattering, burrowing run, unlike the leaps and bounds of the mice-people, he started unerringly toward a narrow opening almost hidden under an overhanging patch of yellow-green sphagnum moss. Disappearing down the tunnel, he dashed along furiously, while his long widespread whiskers gave him instant notice of the turns and twists of the tunnel, which he threaded at full speed.

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THE KILLERS

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Ahead of him fled a young meadow-mouse, on his way to join other members of the family who were having a light lunch on what was left in the storehouse of their winter's supplies. Hearing the rapid pattering and sniffing behind him, the mouse made the fatal mistake of keeping on to the storeroom — a large chamber underground, where three grown mice were feasting. Confident in the fighting ability of his family, he had yet to learn that odds are nothing to a shrew. In spite of his speed, the mouse dashed into the round room only a little ahead of his pursuer. The storehouse was large enough to make a good battleground, but, unfortunately for the mice, contained only one entrance.

Then followed a battle great and grim. The mice were on their own ground, four against one and that one only a tiny blind beastling less than half the size and weight of any one of them. It did not seem as if the shrew had a chance against the burly, round-headed meadow-voles, who are the best fighters of all the mice-folk. Yet the issue was never in doubt. The shrew attacked with incredible swiftness. No one of his four foes could make a motion that his quick ear and uncanny sense of touch did not at once detect. Moreover, throughout the whole fight, he never for an instant left the exit-tunnel unguarded. Time and again, from out of the whirling mass of entangled bodies, a meadow-mouse would spring to the door to escape. Always it ran against the fell jaws of the little blind death, and bounded back from the latter's rigid steel-like body. Again and again the mice

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leaped high, and like little boxers thrust the shrew away from them by quick motions of their forepaws. At times they would jump clear over him, slashing and snapping as they went, with their two pairs of long curved sharp teeth. The shrew's snout, however, was of tough leathery cartilage. Its tiny hidden and unseeing eyes needed no protection, while its thick fur and tough skin could be pierced only by a long grip, which he prevented by his tactics. Never using his forefeet like the mice, he stood with feet outspread and firmly braced, head and snout pointing up, and constantly darted his jaws forward and downward with fierce tearing bites. With each one he brought no less than six pointed fighting teeth into play. These, driven by the great muscles of the shrew's neck and jaws, made ghastly ripping cuts through the thin skins of the mice. The latter kept up a continual squeaking as they moved, but the little killer fought in absolute silence. His wee body seemed to have an inexhaustible store of fierce strength and endurance, and throughout the battle it was always the shrew who attacked and the mice who retreated. Like the raccoon, the shrew is perfectly balanced on all four feet, and can move forward, backward, or sidewise with equal readiness. With swift little springs this one constantly tried for a throat-hold; yet amid the tangle and confusion of the struggle, never once did he fail to guard the one way out.

Round and round the storehouse the battle surged for a long half hour, with the shrew always between the doorway and his struggling, leaping opponents.

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The grain-fed mice lacked the blood-bought endurance of their opponent. The young mouse who had led the shrew to the storehouse was the first to go. In the very middle of a leap, he staggered and fell at the feet of his enemy. Instantly the long curved jaws closed on his head, and the fierce teeth of the shrew crunched into his brain.

It was the beginning of the end. One by one the others fell before the automatic rushes and slashes of the little fighting-machine, until only one was left, a scarred, skilled veteran, who had held his own in many a fight. As he felt his strength ebbing, with a last desperate effort the mouse dodged one of the shrew's rushes, and managed to sink his two pairs of curved teeth into the tough muscles of the other's neck. Then a horrifying thing happened. Without even trying to break the mouse's grip, the shrew bent nearly double, and buried his pointed muzzle deep into the soft flesh below the other's foreleg. Driven by the cruel hunger which ruled his life, he ate like fire through skin and flesh and bone. The mouse fought, the shrew ate, and the outcome was certain, as it must be when a fighter who depends on four teeth dares the clinch with one who uses twelve. Even as the mouse unlocked his jaws for a better hold he tottered and fell dead under the feet of the other.

For long days and nights the shrew stayed in the storeroom, until all that remained of the meadow-mice were four pelts neatly folded and four skeletons picked bare of even a shred of flesh. Moreover, the store of seeds left by the mice was gone, too.

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Finally, one morning, as the sun came up over the pines, the little masked death flashed out of the burrow with the same pattering rush with which he had entered, and hurried toward a near-by brook, to quench an overpowering thirst. As he approached the bank, he passed one of his larger brethren, the blarina, or mole shrew, whose track in the sand was like an uncovered tunnel filled with zigzag paw-prints. Although both were blind, each felt the other's presence, and it was fortunate for the smaller of the two that the blarina had also just fed, since shrews allow no ties of blood to interfere with their eminently practical appetites.

Just before the little blind runner reached the bank, he encountered another wanderer, whom few of the smaller animals meet and live. It was that demon of the woods, the short-tailed weasel, going to and fro in the earth, seeking whom he might devour. Behind him, as always, was a trail of dead and dying animals. Into every hole large enough to admit his slim body, he wormed his way like a hunting snake, and passed, swift and silent as death itself, through brush-piles, hollow logs, and up and down trees, to peer into the round window of a woodpecker's home or a squirrel's nest. Meadow-mice, deer-mice, chipmunks, rats, rabbits, and even squirrels in their trees the slayer ran down to their death; for, unlike the shrews, a weasel kills from blood-lust and not from hunger.

Like some great inch-worm, the weasel looped its way along, until its path crossed that of the shrew pattering toward the brook. Even in the face of

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this incarnate terror of the wild folk the little shrew showed all the stubborn courage of his race and, refusing to turn aside, passed within an inch of the deadly jaws of the red killer. Nothing in nature, save the stab of one of the coiled pit-vipers, is swifter than the pounce of the weasel. In his grip the shrew, despite all of his fierce courage, would have had no more chance than a man ground by the frightful teeth of a killer whale. Against the larger mammals, however, this fierce fragment of flesh and blood has one last defense, which saved him that day.

As the weasel caught a whiff of the pungent, evil odor of the shrew's fur, he drew aside, his lips curled back over his sharp teeth in a grimace of disgust, and the masked beastling passed unscathed. At a little cove by the edge of a stump, the shrew drank deep. The pointed snout had just come to the surface, when his quick hearing caught from overhead a tiny flutter of sound. Long ages of sudden death from the air for the shrew-folk made the next movement of this one automatic. As if this sound-wave from overhead had touched some reflex, he dived into the water at the first vibration, like a frog, and swam deep down under the overhanging bank. A fraction of a second later a pair of sharp, cramped talons sank deep into the bank where he had stood, printing in the sand the " K " signature of the hawk-folk, and a buff-waistcoated sparrow hawk swooped into the air again, with a shrill disappointed, " killi, killi, killi! "

As the little fugitive swam along the bank some-

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thing long and sinuous passed him like a flash in the golden water. For a land animal a shrew is no mean swimmer; but the banded watersnake outswims the fish on which it feeds. This one went past the speeding mammal so fast, that it showed only a blur of dingy brown markings on its back and a gleam of marbled red blotches on its belly, as it disappeared in a hole which sloped under the bank. Although not venomous, the banded watersnake has within its flat triangular head a mouthful of sharp teeth which it is always willing to use, and is an exceptionally active, powerful serpent. Even one of the larger mammals might well have hesitated before attacking one in its own den.

Not so the shrew. By the swirl and suction of the water, he knew that something large and living had gone by. That was enough. Food meant everything, size and odds nothing, in his life. The snake had scarcely time to turn around in its dark burrow, before its cold unwinking eyes saw a dark little figure come out of the water and rush up the long slope that led to the hollow under the bank. Although less than two feet long, the watersnake was more than ten times the size of the shrew, and it seemed as unequal a combat as would be one between a man and any of the vast monsters spawned of the primeval ooze. The serpent threw itself into the figure-of-eight coil from which it fights, and to the advantages of size, weight, and strength added that of position, since the shrew had to fight uphill. Yet, like the meadow-voles, the snake never had a chance. As the wide-open jaws

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touched the whiskered muzzle, the shrew swerved, and escaped the snapping teeth by the width of a hair, while the crooked crocodile jaws clinched in the large muscles at the angle of the snake's jaw. The barred serpent hissed fiercely, throwing off the sickening effluvium like decayed fruit, which is one of the defenses of a fighting watersnake, and threw its thick body into swift changing loops and coils, hurling the shrew back and forth. The little animal held on with its death grip, and the crooked jaws burrowed deeper and deeper, bringing into play the long rows of sharp cutting teeth.

A watersnake is not a constrictor, and the sandy sides of the den were too soft and narrow to enable it to dislodge the shrew's grip by battering the animal against the walls of the burrow; but again and again it tried to throw its coils over its opponent's rigid body, so as to afford leverage enough to tear the punishing jaws loose. Each time, by a swift movement, the shrew would escape the changing loops, and never for an instant ceased to drive its teeth deeper, until they cut clear through the snake's temporal muscles, and its lower jaw dangled limp and useless. Freed then from any fear of attack, the shrew sank his long curved teeth deliberately into the reptile's brain, and although the snake still struggled, the battle was over.

Once more the ever-hungry little mammal claimed the spoils of victory. Only when there was nothing left of the snake but a well-picked skeleton, did he leave the den. Then again he drank deeply, plunged up through the water, and landed after dark on the

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same little beach from which he had dived days before. As he scurried across an open space in the woods, a dark shadow drifted down from the tree tops and two great wings hovered over him, so muffled by soft feathers that not even the shrew heard a single beat or flutter from them. A second longer above ground, and all his fierceness and courage and swiftness would have availed him nothing against the winged death that overshadowed him.

At that instant, far and faint came a little twittering note from under the leaf carpet. It was only the shadow of a sound, but in a wink the shrew was gone, following the love call of his mate underground. Overhead sounded the deep and dreadful voice of a barred owl, as it floated back to its tree top, disappointed for once of its prey.

At midnight Ben Gunnison, the peddler, reached the little glade where the shrew had disappeared. Trying for a short cut through the Barrens, Ben had followed the old cattle-trail from Perth Amboy, unused for more than a century. At first it stretched straight and plain through the pitch-pine woods. Beyond Double Trouble and Mount Misery, it began to wind, and by the time he had reached Four Mile he was lost. For long he staggered under his heavy pack through thickets of scrub oak, white-cedar swamps, and tangles of greenthorn. By the time he had reached the little opening, he was exhausted, and putting his pack under his head for a pillow, lay down under a great sweet-gum tree to sleep out the night.

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Just before dawn he was awakened by high-pitched, trilling, elfin music. Opening his eyes, he saw in the light of the setting moon two tiny things chasing each other round and round his pack, singing as they ran. Even as he listened, he heard from overhead an ominous cracking noise, and leaped to his feet just as a decayed stub whizzed down, landing with a crash on his pack. As long as he lives, Ben will believe that two fairies saved his life.

"Don't tell me," he would say. "I *saw* 'em. Little weeny fellows half the size of a mouse callin' me to get up. An' I got up. That's the reason I'm here to-day, bless 'em."

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IX

BLACKCROSS

AFTER running twenty miles, old Raven Road stopped to rest under a vast black-oak tree. Beyond its sentinel bulk was Wild-Folk Land. Where hidden springs had kept the wet grass green all winter, the first flower of the year had forced its way through the cold ground. Smooth as ivory, all crimson-lake and gold-green on the outside, the curved hollow showed a rich crimson within. Cursed with an ill name and an evil savor, yet the skunk cabbage leads the year's procession of flowers.

Among the dry leaves of the thickets showed the porcelain petals of a colony of hepatica, snow-white, pale pink, violet, deep purple, pure blue, lilac, and lavender. Beyond them was a patch of spice-bush, whose black fragrant branches snapped brittle as glass, and whose golden blossoms appear before the leaves. At the foot of a bank, hidden by the scented boughs, bubbled a deep unfailing spring, and from it a little trickle of water wound through the thicket into the swale beyond. Growing wider and deeper with every rod, it ran through a little valley hidden between two round, green hills, which widened into a stretch of marshland filled with reeds and thickets of

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wild rose, elderberry, and buttonbush, laced and interlaced with the choking orange strands of that parasite, the dodder.

Beside the stream, and at times crossing it, a path, trodden deep, twisted in and out of the marsh. It was too narrow to have been made by human feet, nor could any man have found and followed so unerringly the little ridges of dry going hidden away between the bogs and under the lush growth. Packed hard by long years of use, nowhere in the path's whole length did any paw-print show. Only in snow-time was the white page printed deep with tracks like those of a dog, but cleaner cut and running in a straight line instead of spraddling to one side. Nor was there ever in these trails the little furrow which a dragging paw makes. Only a fox could have made that long straight line, where every paw-print was stamped in the soft snow as if with a die. From Cold Spring to Darby Creek the long narrow valley belonged to the fox-folk.

Close beside the spring itself, at the very edge of its fringe of bushes, was a deep burrow that ran out into the open field, and yet was so cunningly hidden by a rock and masked by bushes and long grass that few humans ever suspected that a sly, old, gray fox had lived there for a fox-lifetime, or nearly ten years. His range extended to the swamp on the south, and up through the tangle of little wooded hills and valleys to the north known throughout the countryside as the Ridge.

The other end of Fox Valley, and all the Darby

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Creek country from Fern Valley to Blacksnake Swamp was owned by a red-fox family. They were larger than the gray foxes and the blood of long-ago English foxes, brought over by fox-hunting colonial governors, ran in their veins. To the strength and size of the American fox they added the craft of a thousand generations of hunted foxes on English soil.

Both fox families kept, for the most part, strictly to their own range, for poaching in a fox country always means trouble. Both ranges were well stocked with rabbits, three varieties of mice, birds, frogs, and the other small deer on which foxes live. Occasionally the hunters of both families would make a foray on some far-away farm and bring back a plump hen, a pigeon, or sometimes a tame duck. Never did the hunter rob a near-by farm, or go twice in succession to the same place; for it is a foolish fox who will make enemies for himself on his own home ranges — and foolish foxes are about as common as white crows.

The red-fox range included a number of well-hidden homes. Rarely did they occupy the same house two seasons in succession, for experience has taught foxes that long leases are neither sanitary nor safe. This year they were living on the slope of a dry hillside in the very heart of a beech wood. Long years before they had fashioned their very first home, and during every succeeding year of occupancy had added improvements and repairs, until it was as complete a residence as any fox family could wish. The first burrow, which was some nine inches in diameter, ran

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straight into the hillside for about three feet; then it angled sharply along the side of a hidden rock, and ran back some twenty feet more. From off the main shaft branched different galleries. One led to a storehouse, and another to a chamber where the garbage of the den was buried; for there are no better housekeepers among the wild folk than the foxes. Last and best hidden of all was the sleeping-room, fully twelve inches across, and carefully lined with soft, dry grass.

The perpendicular air shaft ran from the deepest part of the tunnel to the centre of a dense thicket on the hillside. In an irregular curve of some twenty feet, two more entrances were dug. Both of these joined the main shaft after describing an angle. Last of all was the emergency exit, the final touch which makes a fox home complete. It is always concealed carefully, and is never used except in times of great danger. This one was dug down through a decayed chestnut stump some two feet high, hidden in a fringe of bushes some distance up the hillside, and wound itself among the roots, and connected with the sleeping-chamber. Back of the main entrance lay a chestnut log fully three feet through, and screened from the hilltop by a thicket interlaced with greenbrier. This was the watchtower and sun-parlor of the fox family. From it they could survey the whole valley, while one bound would bring them to any one of the regular entrances.

On a day in early April, full of sunshine and showers blowing across a soft spring sky, the old dog

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fox approached the den, carrying a cottontail rabbit slung over one shoulder. As he came to the main entrance, he suddenly stopped and, with one foot raised, stood motionless, sniffing a faint scent from the depths of the burrow. Without entering, he laid the rabbit down at the lip of the opening and withdrew; for no dog fox may enter his burrow after the cubs arrive. There were three of them — blind, lead-colored little kittens, who nuzzled and whimpered against Mother Fox's warm body and fed frantically every hour or so during the first days of their new life. For the next three weeks Father Fox hunted for five. Squirrels, red and gray, chipmunks, birds, rabbits, and scores and scores of mice, found their way into the den.

The ninth day of the cubs' life on earth marked an event more important to Mother Fox than the Declaration of Independence, or the promulgation of the Suffrage Amendment. On that date, all three of her cubs opened their eyes! Twelve nights later, when the May moonlight made a new heaven and a new earth, they took their first journey. It was only twenty feet, but it covered the distance from one world to another. For a moment three sharp little noses peered out wonderingly at the new world. It was roofed with a shimmering sky instead of damp earth, and was big and boundless and very, very beautiful. Altogether the newcomers approved of it highly, although there did seem to be a great waste of air, and it was not so warm and cozy as the world underground.

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THE FOX FAMILY

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Then the trio of little heads disappeared, and Mother Fox came out and winnowed the air through the marvelous mesh of her nostrils. Convinced that all was safe, she called her cubs out with one of those wild-folk signals pitched below the range of human ears. A moment later, the cubs were out and about in the dangerous, delightful world of out-of-doors. With their long, sprawly legs and heads too big for their bodies, they had something of the lumbering, appealing looks that puppies have. Their broad foreheads and pricked-up ears seemed enormous compared with their little faces. Each one in turn put his head to one side and looked engagingly at the new world. With their soft woolly backs and round little stomachs, they seemed made to be patted and cuddled. Yet, playful and confiding as they appeared, a profound wisdom and craft looked out from their young eyes, which is never seen in those of any other animal.

Mother Fox watched them with much pride. Forgotten were the nine cubs of the year before, and the quartettes and sextettes of many a yesteryear. Never before, in her opinion, had there ever been three cubs so wise and beautiful and remarkable as these. Suddenly she raised her voice in the squalling screech of a vixen. Again and again the fierce uncanny sound shuddered away over the hills, and a pair of newly arrived summer boarders, who were strolling along Raven Road in the moonlight, returned with exceeding haste to old Mose Butler's farmhouse, and reported to their grinning host that they had heard the scream of a panther.

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From far down Darby Creek came the answering bark of the old fox. Only the sudden explosive quality of the sound made it resemble in any way the bark of a dog. A curious screeching quality of tone ran through it, and it sounded as if made by some animal who was trying to bark but had never really learned how. Then, with the disconcerting suddenness of a fox, Father Fox stood before his new family for the first time. From his narrow jaws swung a fringe of plump mice, with their tails ingeniously crossed so that they could all be carried by one grip of the narrow jaws. Dropping them, the old fox stared solemnly at his family grouped in the moonlight, and then growled deep and approvingly in his throat. Two of the cubs wore the usual clouded pale yellow of a young red fox. The third, however, showed, faintly outlined, a velvety black face, ears, muzzle, and legs, with a silky black streak down his back, crossed at the shoulders by a similar stripe shading into reddish and silver-gray, while his little black tail had the silver tip which is the hall-mark of the rare cross-fox, which is sometimes born into a red-fox family.

From that night the training of the little fox family began. Father Fox no longer brought his kill directly to the den. Instead, he hid it not too carefully some fifty yards away, and the cubs learned to know the scent of food — flesh or fowl — and to dig it out from under piles of leaves or brush, or even from under an inch or so of freshly dug earth. Then, with tiny growls, they would crouch and steal forward and pounce upon the defenseless kill, with

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tremendous exhibitions of craft and ferocity. They went out on little hunting-trips by night, with Mother Fox, to lonely hillside pastures, where she taught them to hunt field-mice in the withered grass. In the starlight, they would steal up to some promising clump, and rising on their hind legs peer far forward, with ears pricked up to catch the faintest squeak and eyes alert to note the tiniest movement in the grass. They learned to spring and pounce like lightning, with outspread paws, just ahead of where the grass stirred ever so slightly. If successful, they would kill with one nip a plump, round-headed, short-tailed meadow-mouse. Every night they went farther and farther, until at last with Mother Fox they covered the whole range, at the brisk walk which is the usual hunting-gait of a fox, with frequent pauses and sniffings and listenings.

It was Father Fox who first took them into the sunlight, which was as strange and unnatural to fox children as midnight out-of-doors would be to a human child. He it was who taught them, when in danger, to stand still and keep on standing still — one of the most difficult courses in the wild-folk curriculum. Sometimes they met man, whose approach through the woods or across the fields sounded as loud to the fox children as the rumble of an auto-truck would sound to the human child. Crouched in the bleached tawny grass, absolutely immovable, the foxes looked so much like tussocks that it would have taken a trained eye indeed to have discovered them.

Just as the cubs had grown old and wise enough to

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be left in and about the burrows alone, the Sword fell. That night both of the old foxes were abroad on a hunt too long for the untrained muscles of the cubs. Awaiting their return, the little foxes were playing and frolicking silently around the den. They had learned that the scent of man or dog means death to foxes, and to seek safety in their burrow at any strange sound. No one of them knew that a shadow in the air, which drifted silently nearer to the den, might conceal any danger. Suddenly the shadow fell, and seemed to blot out the little straw-colored cub farthest from the burrow. He had but time for a terrified whicker, when a double set of steel-like talons clamped through his soft fur clear to his heart, and in a second the little body shot up through the air and disappeared in the darkness. A few moments later, from a far-away clump of trees, sounded the deep sinister "Hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo" of the great horned owl.

Once having found the fox family, Death followed fast on its trail. One morning the largest cub awoke, and decided to take a stroll by himself in the sunlight, without waiting for Father Fox to come, and without waking the rest of the family, who slept curled up together in the sleeping-room of the den. Stealing out of the main burrow, the little cub sniffed the air wisely, and examined the landscape from under wrinkled brows with an air of profound consideration. At first he followed a winding path which ran through a bit of woodland where Mother Fox had taken him once before by night. Finding no trace of game there, he left the path and climbed up a rocky hillside half

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DEATH IN THE DARK

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covered with brush and trees. Just as he was turning a corner of a little rocky ledge which jutted out in front of him, he heard a low thick hiss. Directly in front of him, in an irregular loop, lay a hazel-brown snake, dappled with blunt Y's of a rich chestnut color, its head and neck being the color of rusty copper.

For a second the young fox looked into the lidless, deadly eyes of the copperhead, with their strange oval pupils, the hall-mark of the fatal pit-vipers. All in one flash, the grim jaws of the snake gaped open, the two movable fangs of the upper jaw unfolded and thrust straight out like tiny spearheads, and the fatal crooked needles stabbed deep in the cub's soft side. Growling fiercely in his little throat, he clenched his sharp teeth through the snake's spine; but even as he closed his jaws, the fatal virus touched the tide of his life and he fell forward.

The wild folk have no tears, nor may they show their sorrow by the sobs and wailing of humankind, yet there was something in the dumb despair of the two foxes who had followed the trail of their lost cub, as they hung over the soft little body, that showed that the love of our lesser brethren for their little ones is akin to the love of humankind. Thereafter all the watchfulness and the love and the hope of the two were concentrated on the little fox with the black cross on his back. Night and day Mother Fox guarded him. Day and night Father Fox taught and trained him, until he had acquired much of the lore of fox-kind. He learned to catch birds and mice and

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frogs and squirrels, and even the keen-eared cottontail rabbit, whose eyes can see forward and backward equally well. He learned, too, the lessons of prudence and foresight which keep foxes alive when ice and snow have locked many of their larders. Once, when he was crossing a pasture with Father Fox, the latter stopped and stood like a pointing dog, one velvety black bent forefoot in the air, while with outstretched muzzle he sniffed the faintest of warm scents, which seemed to float from a clump of tangled dry grass. Stealing forward like a shadow, the old fox sprang at the tusssock. Before he landed, a plump quail buzzed out of the cover like a bullet, to be caught by the fox in mid-air. Underneath a fringe of dry grass was a round nest of pure white, sharp-pointed eggs — so many of them that they were heaped up in layers.

After eating the quail, the old fox carefully carried off the eggs and hid them under layers of damp moss, where they would keep indefinitely and be a resource in the famine days that were yet to come.

Another day the cub learned the advantage of teamwork. On that day the two old foxes were hunting together, and, as usual, Blackcross tagged along. Near the middle of a great field, a flock of killdeer were feeding — those loud-voiced plover, which wear two rings around their white necks. For a moment the two foxes stood motionless, staring at the distant birds. Then, without a sound, Mother Fox turned back. For a moment Blackcross could watch her as she made a wide detour around the field, and then

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she disappeared from sight. Father Fox lay still for several minutes, with his wise head resting on his fore-paws. Then, while Blackcross stayed behind, the old fox started deliberately toward the flock of feeding birds. At times he would stop, and bound high in the air, and scurry up and down, waving his flaunting brush and cutting curious capers, moving gradually nearer and nearer to the flock.

The killdeer, which are wise birds in spite of their loud voices, moved farther and farther away toward the end of the pasture, ready to spring into the air and flash away on their long narrow wings if the fox came too near, but evidently much interested in his antics as they fed. Gradually the curveting fox edged the flock clear across the field, until they were close to a thicket that lay between the field and a patch of woods beyond. Then he redoubled his efforts, prancing and bounding and rolling over and over, while his fluffy tail showed like a plume above the long grass, and the birds stopped feeding and watched him with evident curiosity.

Suddenly, when the attention of the whole flock was fixed on the performing fox, there was a rustle in the thicket, and out flashed a tawny shape. Before the flock could spring into the air, Mother Fox had caught one bird in her teeth and beaten down another with her paws.

Another morning Blackcross learned what happens to foxes who poach on their neighbor's preserves. In the early dawn-light, he was loping along the upper end of the valley with Father Fox. Suddenly the fur

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bristled all along the latter's back, and he gave a little churring growl. Right ahead of him, trotting along a path made by a generation of red-fox pads, came the old gray fox who lived by Cold Spring, a dead cottontail rabbit swung over one shoulder. The poacher was caught with the game. With another growl, the old red fox sprang at the trespasser. The gray fox was a mile from his burrow, and knowing that the red fox could outpace him, decided to fight for his booty. With a quick flirt of his head, he tossed the rabbit into a near-by bush, and with bristling back awaited the attack.

Walking stiff-legged like two dogs, and growling deep in their throats, the two came together, until they stood sidewise to each other, sparring for an opening. Finally, the old red fox snapped at the other's foreleg, with a movement more like the slash of a wolf than the bite of a dog. The gray fox dropped his head, and the bared teeth of the two snicked together. Again the red fox made the same lead, and met with the same block. The third time he feinted, and as the other dropped his head, whirled and brought his brush, with a blinding, stinging swish, across the eyes of the gray fox. Before the latter could recover, the narrow jaws of the red fox had met in the soft flesh just above the gray hind leg. A wolf would have hamstrung his opponent and killed him at his leisure; but foxes rarely fight to the death. As the old gray fox felt the rending teeth tear through his soft skin, he yelped, tore himself loose, and started full-speed for his den. For two hundred yards the

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red fox pursued him, with such swiftness that he managed to nip his unprotected hind quarters several times. At each bite the fleeing gray fox yelped with the high, shrill, sorrowful note of a hurt little dog; and when Father Fox returned to claim the spoils of victory, all that could be seen of the other was a gray streak moving rapidly toward Cold Spring.

As the cub reached his full stature, he ranged farther and farther afield with the two old foxes. He learned all the hiding and camping places of the range, and how to sleep out in a blaze of sunlight in some deserted field, looking for all the world like a tussock of tawny blackened grass, or, if so be that he hunted by day and slept by night, he found that he wore a blanket on his back which kept him warm even during the coldest nights. As for his unprotected nose and four paddies, he wrapped them up warm in the fluffy rug of his thick soft brush. By the time frost had come, his fur had grown long and glossy and very beautiful, with the velvet cross of midnight-black bordered with old-gold, silver, and tawny-pink, his black brush waving aloft like a white-tipped plume.

Death came with the frost, in the form of traps, hounds and hunters. Old Father Fox taught him how to escape them all. Many years ago he had lived across the hills on the lonely Barrack, where the Deans and the Blakesleys and the Howes and the Baileys and the Reeds have a far-away hill country of their own. Old Fred Dean lived there, and prided himself on both the wild and the tame crops which he raised on his hill farm. He made the whitest,

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sweetest maple sugar in the world, and harvested hickories, chestnuts, butternuts, and even hazel-nuts. It was his fur crop, however, which was the most profitable. Foxes, raccoons, skunks, muskrat, mink — the old man knew how to trap them all.

In Father Fox's second year, he was caught in a trap which Fred had cunningly hidden in the snow among a maze of cattle tracks — the last place where a fox would suspect danger. The fox finally managed to work his imprisoned foot out of the gripping jaws; but it had cost him four toes to learn that the scent of man or iron meant death to foxes. He never forgot, and he taught Blackcross to fear the tiniest whiff of either. As for dogs, the old fox taught his cub that no dog can overtake a fox going uphill or in the rough, and that shifting sand and running water are the fox's friends, since his scent will lie in neither. He taught him all the cut-offs, the jumps, and the run-backs of the range, and finally the cherished fortresses where, as a last resort, he might take refuge.

When it came to hunters, the young fox had to take his chances. In the last analysis a man's brain can outwit that of a fox. It was when the blaze and the glow of the crimson and gold frost-fires had died away to the russet of late fall that the fox family was most in danger, for the Raven Hunt Club needed a fox. Three times now the men had dressed themselves with great care, in wonderful scarlet coats and shiny top-boots, while the women wore comfortable breeches and uncomfortable collars; and they had

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all jumped fences and waded brooks and crashed through thickets; but never a fox could they find, so close had the dwellers in Fox Valley lain hidden. In fact, the last hunt had been a drag-hunt, and the pack had followed for hours the scent of a bag of anise which had been dragged the day before by a string, through the woods and across the fields, by a sleepy stable-boy on a broken-down hunter. But you cannot rise in your stirrups and shout "Tally-ho!" or "Stole away!" or any of the other proper hunting remarks, over a bag of anise. Then, too, the hounds have nothing to worry and kill at the end of the hunt; nor can the brush be cut off for a trophy, for an anise bag has n't any brush.

Thanksgiving was two scant weeks away, and it was absolutely necessary for the happiness of the Hunt that a live fox be secured at once. Accordingly the Raven Hunt Club offered fifty dollars for a live red fox. Grays were barred, because they prefer to hide in burrows and be safe rather than run and be killed. For a week all the farmers' boys for miles around Fox Valley trapped desperately, but without success. Father Fox had not paid four toes for nothing. Then they sent for Fred Dean. Thereafter, one night Blackcross, while hunting over a hilltop pasture, noted a long, freshly turned furrow that ran straight across the field, which was filled with old chaff taken from deserted barns and smelt delightfully of mice. Along the furrow and through the litter the young fox nosed his way, ready to pounce upon the first mouse which darted out. Suddenly

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there was a snap, and Blackcross was caught by his slim dark muzzle. There the old trapper found him the next morning, hardly alive; and when he saw that he had secured a cross-fox, demanded a hundred from the committee instead of the offered fifty. Said committee took the fox, and advertised far and wide that the Thanksgiving Hunt would be after such a fox as had never been hunted before in the memory of man.

The holiday turned out to be one of those rare and fleeting days of Indian summer which Autumn sometimes borrows from her sister. The pack was in fine fettle. The horses and the hunters were fit, and the hunt breakfast excellent. Everybody was thankful — except the shivering little fox. For days he had been cooped in a dirty wire cage, and eaten tainted meat and drunk stale water, and he was stiff and sore from his night in the trap and from lack of exercise. Just at sunrise on Thanksgiving morning, he was crammed into a bag, and then let out two fields ahead of the pack. As he shot into the sunlight, there was a chorus of shouts, yells, and yelps, and a crowd of men, women, horses, and hounds rushed after him in a tremendous burst of speed.

The young fox's legs tottered under him as he ran. Moreover, for a mile around the country was level. As he crossed the first field, the pack was already at the farther wall, and would surely have overtaken him in the third field if it had not been for one of the old fox's lessons. The pasture sloped up to where a sand bank showed as a great crescent gash in the

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turf. Springing to the side of the bank, the fox clung to it like a fly, scurried along its side, cleared the stone wall beyond, and headed for the thickets of Fox Valley. The shifting sand left no track or scent, and while the pack puzzled out the trail, Blackcross won to the shelter of the nearest thicket.

Up and down the hillsides, across marshes and through tangles of underbrush, he doubled, checked, turned, and twisted. Raven Hunt, however, boasted the best pack of fox-hounds in the state, nor had Blackcross either the strength or endurance for a long run. His pace became slower and slower, while the bell-like notes of the hounds and the shouts of the hunters sounded ever nearer and louder.

Only just in time the beset fox saw looming up before him the best hidden of all the fox fortresses in the Valley. It seemed only an impenetrable tangle of greenbrier on the hillside — that vine whose stems are like slim, green wires, studded everywhere with up-curved thorns through which neither man nor beast can force a way. Through the very middle of the tangle ran the naked trunk of a fallen chestnut, showing just above the barbed vines. As the pack scrambled through the barway at the foot of the hill, the little fox ran along the log, and with all his last remaining strength sprang far out across the interlaced tangle of vine and thorn, where the smooth needles under a little white pine made a tiny island in the thicket. From there the fox bounded over a narrow belt of greenbrier into a mass of wild honeysuckle, whose glossy green leaves and bending

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vine-stocks carpeted the hill at that point fully two feet deep. Across the yielding surface he hurried, until he reached the entrance of a little tunnel beneath the vines, entirely hidden from sight by the drooping leaves. Through this he crept noiselessly, beneath the green carpet, until he reached the entrance to a burrow which led far up the hillside and had no less than three well-concealed exits.

For a long hour the pack and the hunters and the horses circled and beat and trampled back and forth through the thicket, and as far into the greenbrier tangle as they could force a way; but no one of them found the lost trail. A hundred dollars had been spent and nothing killed. Everybody agreed that it was a most unfortunate ending to a good day — everybody, that is, except the fox.

As the months wore on, Blackcross hunted more and more by himself, nor did he use any of the family dens. This was partly because snow leaves a tell-tale trail, which he who hunts can read, and partly because of a difference in the attitude toward him of the old foxes. Among the wild folk the love and care of parents cease when their children have become full-grown. This is part of nature's plan to scatter families, and prevent the in-breeding which will weaken the stock. At last the time came when Mother Fox no longer allowed him the freedom of the den in which he had been born, and Father Fox growled in his throat when he met him carrying his kill.

Then the love-moon of the foxes in February

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showed in the sky, and something drove Blackcross far afield — something that called and cried, and would not let him sleep, and took away even the interest and joy of a successful hunt. Across the ridges, through Fern Valley and beyond Blacksnake Swamp he journeyed, until, far beyond them all, he found a lonely valley shut in on all four sides by steep slopes, and untenanted by any of the fox-folk. On the crest of one of the hills stood an abandoned haystack, left by some thriftless farmer years before, and so bleached and weathered by sun and storm that it was useless as hay, but an ideal place for a fox-warren. Under this Blackcross dug a home with many entrances, all of them cunningly concealed by the overhanging hay. Through the centre of the stack itself, he ran a series of tunnels and rooms, besides the safer ones far underground.

Finally, it was almost completed — almost but not quite. Night after night the young fox barked from the top of the hill with a sharp staccato screech, which could be heard a long mile away. Then came the night of the full moon. There was no snow and overhead in the crisp air wheeled Orion the Hunter, Lepus the Hare, the Great and Little Dog, and all the other mighty constellations of winter. Under the sheen and shimmer of the stars and through the still moonlight, Blackcross sent his bark echoing and ringing, until at long last it was answered by a curious, high-pitched squall which to Blackcross contained all the magic and music of sky and earth. Nearer and nearer the sound approached, until

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finally, in the moonlight, a slim tawny figure stole up to the stack. For a moment black muzzle and tawny touched. Then Blackcross turned and disappeared down one of the entrances to his burrow, and the stranger followed. At last, his home was complete.

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SEA OTTER

THE short Arctic summer had flung its flower fields among the glaciers of the Siberian coast, like many-colored jewels set in crystal. Flocks of skuas, jaegers, and little auks circled and screamed above the smoky green waters of the Straits; and far out from shore a bed of kelp writhed and tossed like a mass of golden-brown sea snakes.

There, cradled on the swaying stems, a water-baby was born. He had a funny little nose, with a padded cushion on top which made it look like the ace of spades, and his round, blunt head was of a dingy white color, while the rest of his fifteen inches was covered with a loose, kinky, gray-brown coat. Its harsh outer surface, sprinkled with long white hairs, covered a velvet-like inner fur that gave promise of the glory that was yet to be.

In spite of his insignificant appearance, the little cub was of blood royal, of the lineage of the sea otter, that king of fur-bearers, who wears a fortune on his back and is dogged by death every moment of his life. Vitus Behring and his shipwrecked crew discovered them in 1741, in the surf and shallows around a barren island, in the sea which now bears his name. When

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they won their way back to Asia, sly, wise Chinese merchants paid their weight in silver for the new furs, so lustrous, silky, and durable, which the sailors had been using for coats and blankets. In Russia they came to be worth their weight in gold, outranking even the royal sables, which none but the Tsar and his nobles might wear. To-day the pelt of a sea otter is worth its weight in platinum or palladium.

This last-born princeling soon learned how to float on his back, with his round little head just showing above the kelp. For the most part, however, he lived clasped in his mother's arms and wrapped in the silky folds of her fur, while he nuzzled and fed against her warm breast, making happy little chirps and grunts of satisfaction, quite like a human baby.

To-day, as they rocked back and forth in the swinging water, the kelp-carpet in front of them parted, and a great, blunt, misshapen head thrust itself into the air a few yards away. It had little eyes set high in the skull, while the ears showed below the grinning mouth filled full of blunt teeth like white water-worn pebbles — the hallmark of a sea otter.

The newcomer was none other than Father Otter, come to look over his son and heir. He did not come very close to his family, for mother otters do not permit even their mates to approach too near a newborn cub. As the old dog otter stretched himself out on the kelp-raft, his cylindrical body, all gleaming ebony and silver in the sunlight, showed nearly as long as that of a man, and weighed perhaps a hundred and twenty-five pounds. It was the great otter's

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pelt, however, that stamped him as the sea king that he was. Lustrous as light on the water, the inner fur had a close pile like velvet and, frosted with long white hairs, showed a tinge of silver-purple gleaming through its long loose folds.

For some time the old dog otter gravely surveyed his mate and his new cub, approvingly. Then he scanned sea and sky and kelp, listening the while with a pair of the sharpest ears that ever guarded the life of one of the wild folk, at the same time winnowing the air through a pair of nostrils that could smell smoke — that danger-signal to all wild people — a mile away. There was no sign of danger anywhere, and a moment later he disappeared under the water, after the food which his vibrant body unceasingly required.

For long after his disappearance the mother otter anxiously studied the horizon for the tiniest danger-signal. Convinced at last that all was well, she stretched herself out on the slow-swinging kelp, for one of those periods of quiet happiness which come even into the lives of the hunted. While her cub snuggled against her soft fur, she tossed a kelp-bulb high into the air, catching it like a ball, first in one bare little palm, then in the other, while she sang the cradle-song which all little sea otters know. High and shrill she chirped and twittered like a bird, in the midst of that lonely sea, clasping her sleepy baby closer as she sang.

There seemed no living thing near, yet death is never far from the sea otter. From mid-sky what

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seemed a dark wisp of cloud drifted toward the sea. Driven down by hunger from the North, an eagle owl, all buff and gray and brown, was crossing from Asia to America; for, unlike most of his fierce clan, he hunted by day. Larger than that death-in-the-dark, the great-horned owl, or that fierce white ghost of the North, the snowy owl, he skimmed down toward the kelp-bed, his round, fixed eyes gleaming red and horrible in the sunlight. Muffled by the softest of down, his great wings, although they had a spread of nearly five feet, were absolutely noiseless.

Not until the shadow of the bird, like the shadow of death itself, fell upon her cub, did the otter have the slightest warning of any danger. By that time it would have been too late for any other creature to escape. No animal, however, on land or sea can dive with the sea otter. Just as the crooked talons were closing, she slipped through the kelp into the water, without a splash, like something fluid, her cub clasped close, while overhead the baffled owl snapped its beak like a pistol shot, and flew on toward the Alaskan coast.

Down through the swaying tangles she twisted her way like an eel, until she passed clear through the floating bed of this strange growth of the sea, which grows with its roots in the air. There the water darkened, and as she neared the bottom a shape flashed ahead of her, lighted with that phosphorescence which all dwellers in the northern seas seem to acquire. The otter recognized the glowing figure as that of a sea bass, a bronze-green fish hardly to be

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distinguished from the small-mouthed black bass of fresh water. The bass was no mean swimmer, but the long, oar-like, webbed hind legs of the sea otter twisted over and over each other like the screw of a propeller, and drove her through the water with such tremendous speed that, in spite of the handicap of the cub, she soon swam down the fish, following its every twist and turn, and in less than a minute had caught it in her blunt teeth. Then, with the plump fish in her jaws, she swam up again through the kelp, and fed full, never for a moment, however, loosening her grip of her cub — for the babies of the sea folk who wander only a few feet from their mothers may never return.

The meal finished, the great otter climbed out on a pinnacle of rock just showing above the kelp. Immediately from a miracle of lithe, swift grace, she changed into one of the slowest and most awkward of animals. The webbed flipper-like hind feet, which drove her with such speed through the water, were of very little use on land, and her tiny forepaws were so short that they seemed to have no wrists at all. Slowly and painfully she waddled up on the rock, and there preened and cleaned and combed and licked every inch of her fur just as a cat would do, until it shone in the sunlight like a black opal.

As the weeks went by, the cub was trained in the lessons of the sea. He learned to enjoy salads of kelp-sprouts, and to dive with his mother to the bottom of the shallows, and watch her grind her way through the great clams of the northwest, whose bivalves are

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a foot in width, or crunch with her pebble-like teeth into the white meat of the vast, armored crabs of those seas. Another one of her favorite foods was the sea urchin — that chestnut burr of the sea. Protected by a bristling hedge of steel-sharp spines, it would seem safe from any attack. Yet, just as the squirrel on land opens without injury the real chestnut burr, so the sea otter had learned the combination which unlocked this little spiked safe of the sea, and devoured with much relish every one she could find.

As the weeks went by, the larder of the kelp-bed began to empty. The clam-beds had been stripped, the sea urchins were gone, and the fish had learned to keep away. Little by little, the mother otter hunted farther and farther from the safety of the kelp; until there came a day when, driven by hunger, she followed a fleeing pollock out into the open sea. The big gleaming fish, with the black line along its silver sides, swam far and fast. Yet, if the otter had not been hampered by her clinging cub, the chase would have been a short one. As it was, she did not overtake the fugitive until it was fully a quarter of a mile away from the kelp. In desperation it swam down into the lower depth, until the dull green of the water changed to black; but always the weasel of the sea was hard on its track, following the phosphorescent trail which the fleeing fish left behind.

Suddenly, as the pollock dived to even lower depths, in the hope that the water-pressure might drive back its pursuer, a grotesquely horrible head thrust itself

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up from the darkness right in its path. Dark, and shining like wet rubber, the shape resembled nothing so much as that of a great, double-headed sledge-hammer. From either of the living hammer-heads gleamed a greenish, malignant eye. Before the pollock could dart aside, the great hammer-head shark turned partly over, there was a flash of sharp teeth, and the fugitive fish disappeared.

A second later the ridged, gray, fifteen-foot body shot toward the otter, with such speed that the water fairly hissed from the scimetar-shaped side-fins. The sea otter is among the swiftest swimmers of the mammals, but no air-breathing creature can compete in speed with a shark. Almost instantly the hammer-head was upon her. The jaws of all the sharks are so undershot that, in order to grip their prey, they must perforce turn over on their sides. This peculiarity of their kind was all that saved the otter. For a second the grim head overshadowed her. Then, with a twist of its long tail, shaped like the fluke of an anchor, the shark turned over and the vast mouth swung open, armed with six rows of inch-long, steel-sharp, triangular teeth, whose edges were serrated like a saw. Each separate tooth was curved back toward the gullet, so that for any living thing caught in their dreadful grip there was no more chance of escape than there would be from the interlocking cog-wheels of a stone-crusher.

As the jaws of death gaped for the sea otter, with a writhe of her swift body she flashed to one side, while the little cub whimpered in her arms and the fatal

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teeth of the shark just grazed her trailing, flipper-like hind legs, so close they snapped behind her. Swerving beneath the great bulk, the otter began a desperate flight for life. Every foot of the shark's gaunt, stripped body was built for speed. There was not a bone anywhere under his drab and livid skin — only rings and strips and columns of tough, springy cartilage, which enabled him to cut through the water like a blade of tempered gray steel. With the rush of a torpedo the grim figure shot after the fleeing otter, who had but one advantage and that was in length. It takes a six-foot body less time to turn than one that measures fifteen feet. In a straightaway race, the fish would have overtaken the mammal in a few seconds; but when it came to twisting, turning, and doubling, the sea otter had an advantage, albeit of the slightest. Again and again the desperate sea mother avoided death by an inch. More than once the ringing jaws of the great fish snapped together just behind her, and only the tiny tick of time which it took to turn over saved her. Desperately she sought to win the refuge of the kelp-bed; but always the gray shape thrust itself between her and safety.

At last an ally of the sea folk joined in the hunt. Water was claiming her toll of oxygen from the alien within her depths. A sea otter can stay under for half an hour at a pinch — but not when swimming at full speed, with the laboring heart pumping blood at capacity; and this one realized despairingly that soon she must breathe or die. Little by little she shaped her course toward the surface, dreadfully

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fearing lest the second she must spend in drawing one deep breath would be her last. She flashed upward through a whole gamut of greens — chrome, cedar, jasper, myrtle, malachite, emerald, ending with the pulsing, golden sap-green of the surface. Swim as she would, however, the monstrous head was always just at her flank, and the slightest pause would give those fatal teeth their grip. Once again she avoided by a hair's breadth a snap of the deadly jaws, and struggled despairingly toward the upper air.

As the great fish turned to follow, out from the sunlight, through the gleaming water, shot a long dark body. Away from the safety of the kelp to the head of horror with its implacable eyes came the old dog otter, for the creed of the sea otter is unchanging — one mate for life and death. With his round misshapen head bristling and his snaky black eyes gleaming like fire, this one crossed the vast back of the shark like a shadow. As the great fish turned to follow the fleeing mother, the blunt pebble-teeth of the dog otter, which can grind the flintiest shells to powder, fastened themselves with a bull-dog grip just behind the last fin of the shark, where its long, sinuous tail joined the body. With all the force of his tremendous jaws, the great sea otter clamped his teeth through the masses of muscles, deep into the cartilage column, crushing one of its ball-and-socket joints.

Like a steel spring, the shark bent almost double on itself. Just as the gaping jaws were about to close, with a quick flirt of his body the otter swung

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across to the other side, without relaxing for an instant the grip of those punishing teeth. The undershot jaws of the great fish could not reach the head of its tormentor, fixed as it was in the central ridge of the shark's back. Again and again the hammer-head bent from side to side; but each time the old dog otter evaded the clashing teeth and ground to bits joint after joint of the shark's spine, while the lashing tail-strokes became feebler and feebler. Not until the mother otter and her cub were safe on their way to the kelp-bed, breathing great life-saving draughts of fresh air at the surface, did the grim jaws of the old otter relax. Then, with an arrowy dive and double, he shot under and over the disabled fish, and sped away to join his mate in the hidden thickets of the kelp.

The swift Arctic summer soon passed, to be followed by the freezing gales of an Arctic winter. With the storms would come an enemy from the land, fiercer and more fatal than any foe that menaced the otter family by sea or sky; for these sea otter were among the last of their race, and there was a price upon their pelts beyond the dreams of the avarice of a thousand murky Aleuts and oily Kolash and Kadiakers, to say nothing of a horde of white adventurers from all the five continents of earth. Only in storms, when the kelp-beds are broken and the otter are forced to seek the shelter of beaches and sea caves, do hunters still have a chance to secure these rarest of all the fur-bearers.

At last came the first of the great winter gales.

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Day after day the wind howled up from the southeast, the storm quarter of that coast, and the air throbbed with the boom of breakers, while all the way down the Straits the white-caps foamed and roared among a tangle of cross-currents.

Out at sea, the great kelp-raft on which the otter family had lived since spring was at last broken and scattered under the pounding of the gale. Otter need sleep as much as humans, and like them, too, must sleep where they can breathe. Battered and blinded by the gale, the little family started to hunt for some refuge where they might slumber out the storm. Along all the miles of coast, and among the myriads of barren islands, there seemed to be no place where they could find a yard of safety. At the first sign of bad weather every strip of beach was patrolled and every islet guarded.

To lonely little Saanak the dog otter first led them, hoping to find some tiny stretch of safe beach among the water-worn boulders piled high along the shore. A mile to windward he stopped, thrust his blunt muzzle high up into the gale, and winnowed the salt-laden air through the meshes of his wonderful nostrils. Then he turned away at right angles, toward another island. A little band of Indian hunters, starved with cold, had built far back among the rocks a tiny fire.

Smoke spells death to a sea otter. Beyond Saanak the wary veteran visited other beaches, only to detect the death-scent of human footprints, although they had been washed by waves and covered by tides. In far-away Oonalaska, he sought the

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entrance of a sea cave in whose winding depths, many years before, he had found refuge. As he thrust his head into the hidden opening, his sturdy breast struck the strands of a net made of sea-lion sinews, so soaked and bleached by salt water that it bore even to his matchless nostrils no smell of danger. With a warning chirp, he halted his mate following close behind, and backed out carefully, without entangling himself among the wide meshes.

Agonizing for sleep, the little band turned back and journeyed wearily to the far-away islet of Attoo, the westernmost point of land in North America. In its lee was a sheltered kelp-raft never broken by the waves, although too near shore to be a safe refuge except in a storm. There, in the very centre of the heaving bed, with the waves booming outside, the otter family slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, their heads buried under the kelp-stems and their shimmering bodies showing on the surface.

At the foot of a high bluff on Kadiak Island crouched Dick Barrington, on his first otter-hunt. Dick was the son of a factor of the Hudson Bay Company, which, in spite of kings and parliaments, still rules Arctic America. With him as a guide was Oonga, the chief of a tribe of Aleutian hunters.

"Stick to old Oonga," the factor had advised. "He knows more about sea otter than any man in his tribe. At that there 's only one chance in a thousand that you 'll get one."

The old chief had allowed the rest of the band to slip away one by one, each choosing the islet or bit of

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shore where he hoped to draw the winning number in this lottery of the sea. Hour after hour went by, and still the old man sat huddled under the lee of the cliff. At last, he suddenly stood up. Although the gale seemed still at its height, his practised eye saw signs that it was about to break, and in a moment, with Dick's help, he had launched the triple-pointed, high-sterned *bidarka,* a little craft made of oiled sea-lion skins, and as unsinkable as any boat could be.

A few quick strokes of the paddle, and they were beyond the breakers. Then, straight across the bay, through the rush and smother of the storm, they shot toward Attoo. Steering by unknown ranges and glimpses of dim islands, old Oonga held his course unfalteringly, until, just as the gale began to slacken, they reached the kelp-bed in the lee of the little island. Across the hollow tendrils the old chief guided the bidarka silently, in a zigzag course. Suddenly he stretched out his paddle, and, touching Dick on the shoulder, pointed to a dark spot showing against the kelp a hundred yards away.

With infinite care the two edged the canoe along, until there before them lay asleep the mother otter, her cub clasped tight in her arms. Even as they watched, the little otter nuzzled its small white nose against its mother's warm breast. As she felt its touch, without opening her eyes she clasped the cub tighter in her arms, with a curiously human gesture, and wrapped it close in her long silky fur, which had a changing shimmer and ripple through it like watered silk — a pelt with which a man might ransom his life.

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As Dick gripped the short heavy club which the old chief had placed at his feet at the beginning of the voyage, and looked down upon the pair, it seemed to him as if the great sea had taken him into her confidence and entrusted the sleeping mother and child to him. Suddenly, in the silence, with sea and sky watching, he knew that he could no more strike down that mother sleeping before him with her dear-loved cub in her arms, than he could have killed a human child entrusted to his care. With a quick motion, he splashed the water over the sleeping otter with the end of his club. So swiftly that the eye could scarcely follow her motion, the great otter flashed out of sight under the kelp, with her cub still held close. Once again, mother-love had been too strong for death.

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